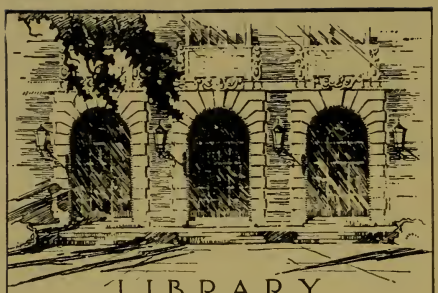
A·WOMAN·OF·FORTY·

ESMÈ·STUART·



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A WOMAN OF FORTY

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A WOMAN OF FORTY

A MONOGRAPH

BY

ESMÈ STUART

AUTHOR OF

'JOAN VELLACOT' 'KESTELL OF GREYSTONE'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II

Methuen & Co.

18 BURY STREET, LONDON, W.C.

1893

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A WOMAN OF FORTY

CHAPTER XI

THE success of everything depended on the weather. The moon had kindly consented to fall in with Lady Mary Milton's plans; but would it be fine? would it be foggy? or would a heavy dew make future rheumatism a present certainty? Like a born gambler, Lady Mary staked her all on these bare chances, and her faith was rewarded. She resisted the suggestion of an afternoon affair. How was enthusiasm to be generated on a hot afternoon? No, evening it must be; the lawn must be illuminated; the trees festooned with lights—in fact, it must be Lady Mary's fairyland realised. To do anything like this badly was to court disgrace and failure. An entertainment which turned out an utter *fiasco* would, we verily believe, have broken Lady Mary's heart. Her popularity depended upon it. The artists

would laugh at her if she failed, and talk of nothing else if she succeeded. Frank's sitters would be more numerous than ever, and her own fame more firmly assured. Besides, besides, whispered the bold lady to herself, '*they* have had so much time to themselves that I am sure of success in that quarter. If Brice Leslie is not in love, then I resign my office.'

This woman was a greater artist than her husband, and added to this she had dramatic power. She was, moreover, a born general; nothing was too minute for her to overlook. By dint of hard work she had got together her actors, and, what was quite as important, her select audience. She had managed to avoid the mass of country neighbours, but she had selected the few who would make the affair brilliant. She had got hold of the barristers, and the clever artists; even the Duke of Blackwater, having got scent of the affair, had managed to procure an invitation for himself and his family. The Duke was distantly connected with Lady Mary, but he was always treated with great impartiality. He was prouder of an invitation from her than of many more apparently greater honours. He would declare that the other

women of fashion gave parties; no one but Lady Mary *entertained.*

'They fancy it comes by nature, this art of entertaining,' she sometimes said; on the contrary, it is consummate skill; it requires more practice and cultivation than Frank's portrait painting.' You would have endorsed her verdict, had you seen her during this time, and you would have owned that it required a great deal of courage and superb faith to have staked so much on a fine evening.

She settled the question of the play at last by asking a friend, already started on the playwrights' road, to furnish one for her, and if it was good his reward was certain. She was going to ask Acton Roland, the owner of the Parthenon Theatre, to her fête; he would make the writer's acquaintance, and thus the author's success was a certainty. Oliver Selby mentally fell at Lady Mary's feet and worshipped her. He read and re-read her long letter, as if it were a message from the Mahatmas. She had given him the *motif*, telling him he must manipulate it as he liked, so he shut himself up for a day and a night, had the play type-written, then copied a dozen times, and sent off a post sooner

than her ladyship had commanded. She sent him a few words by return—

'Excellent, don't forget the 17th of August. I don't put "weather permitting," as that shows so little faith. It is only country clergymen's wives who do this. Don't thank me, I give you a Roland for your Oliver.'

Then the actors! Only Lady Mary herself knew what she went through under this head, for no one else did. She had the further merit of keeping all her failures private, so that in this way it appeared she had none.

It must not be supposed that during this time Rosehill was in a state of confusion; on the contrary, the *dolce far niente* life went on to perfection, only the hostess was invisible during the morning hours. The host had discovered a village girl who would serve excellently as model, and the rest of the day he went out fishing. 'To think,' said his wife, 'that Frank actually *likes* standing at one end of the rod waiting for the fishes to appear at the other! No, the art of fishing passes my comprehension, but I know, as Frank undertakes it, it is a just and honourable calling.'

Politeness required Brice to entertain Miss Cuthbert. In the morning there was the long pleasant dawdle after breakfast on the terrace or the saunter through the conservatory. When Magdalen was in her most agreeable frame of mind, she would ask Brice about his New Zealand experience and his journeys in the interior. Now and then, however, she would, by one of her cynical remarks, make him relapse into silence; but then she could easily chase away his displeasure by one of her smiles, or by a small gesture of deprecating contrition. At other times she would rise and go hastily away to the morning-room, where she spent her time in writing letters in order to make Brice repent of his silence in solitary leisure.

Once during a New Zealand talk Brice inadvertently mentioned Chester's name, then paused, remembering everything and remembering also his promise not again to recur to this subject. Magdalen met his eyes and saw his look of contrition.

'Go on,' she said quickly.

'Chester one day saved my life, but it is a long story.' Brice paused.

'Tell it to me,' said Magdalen, almost under her breath. So Brice retailed a bush adventure, in which Percy Chester's heroic efforts had saved his friend from certain death after a fall from a tree.

'Thank you,' said Magdalen, with a little sigh. It was the sigh of a tired child. 'You, too, were very good to him, I am sure?'

'He was my friend.'

Magdalen rose and went away after this conversation, but soon the sounds of music, in gentler, more subdued tones than were usually heard when Miss Cuthbert was at the piano, were wafted through the open French windows.

Brice remained on the terrace dreamily listening, until he took out a letter from his pocket, a letter he had read but very hastily at breakfast, and now wished to read again.

It was one of Griselda's simple epistles, full of joyous happiness, full, too, of little nothings which she was sure would interest Brice.

'When you come back,' she added, 'we will have two canoes and race down the canal. There is a man near Aldershot who keeps them, little beauties they are. Mind you enjoy yourself, dear

old Brice! Tell me if you still admire Miss Cuthbert, you were not so much smitten with her as I was. I mean soon to come and stay with my cousins if I can be spared, and we could meet sometimes. No one will discover we are lovers. Won't it be charming!'

All at once Lady Mary came out accompanied by Miss Cuthbert. The former held a bundle of papers in her hands.

'It is all settled,' she said; 'here is my play, and now for my actors. I know that they are proverbially tiresome people. My playwright has done well, I give him credit; but he sends a pathetic appeal about the actors. Listen: "For heaven's sake, dear Lady Mary, fly from unworthy amateurs. It will now be possible to get down some professionals. You have only to wire, and I will arrange it all. It will ruin my prospects and your party if you admit bungling actors."'

'Authors are proverbially susceptible,' said Magdalen, casting her eyes over some loose pages of type-writing. 'Here are seven characters in the play, this necessitates three or four of the actors being really good.'

'Excuse me, Magdalen, *all* of them must be good. In short plays, the whole must be perfect. If a diamond is small, let it be of the first water and no black speck visible. But *you* can have the part of Esther, I am bent on that; I am come to ask Mr. Leslie if he will undertake the hero—save the mark!—for our hero is very weak. I have a recollection of hearing you had talents in the acting line, but I shall trust you all in all, or not at all.'

'As a young man,' said Brice, taking the copy in his hand, 'I believed I could play all parts. I am more diffident now, but when I have read the play I will give you a faithful answer.'

'The truth is, I prefer good amateurs in a thing of this kind to your mediocre professionals. They have little tricks and mannerisms to which only distance can lend enchantment. True, they make themselves heard, but some of their vulgar additions are better not heard. Captain Sparks will do Sir Anthony Croft to perfection; you, Magdalen, shall be the rich Esther; but what about Meta Bruce? I declare that pretty Miss Foy would suit admirably, only I should doubt if acting were in her line; do you know, Mr. Leslie?'

'No, oh no, I am sure she could not do it,' said Brice quickly. Griselda should not come into all this.

'Well, there is that nice little actress, Lottie Linden; she acts very well, though she can do nothing else. Strange that that gift is sometimes the one talent of stupid people, I suppose because they possess a high degree of receptiveness. I will telegraph to her. Mr. Bruce the lawyer must be well done, I think he shall be a professional—tricks will not matter; and also for the butler—amateurs overdo servants. The Jew—anyone can do that.'

Brice, who had been casting his eyes over the play, now looked up.

'This is a difficult part, leave me out.' He found Magdalen looking at him.

'If you can act at all it will not be very difficult. Please say "yes."'

'Do you wish it?' said Brice. He did not know that he was being led away by the sudden gentleness of Magdalen's voice.

'Yes.'

'You cannot refuse,' said Lady Mary, successfully hiding the smile of pleasure that came to her

lips. To see Magdalen asking a favour of any one was a strange sight. At that moment the little lady would have staked a very high sum on her success.

'Very well, I accept.'

'Now I see triumph before me,' said Lady Mary. 'Discuss your parts, and, pray, do not fail me. Leave the rest to me. We will rehearse the evening before. By the way, I'll write a note to the pretty New Zealander; she will be a help, or shall I say an inspiration?'

Lady Mary was gone before Brice could answer, and he was left alone with Miss Cuthbert, who was reading the play, entitled 'Unlimited Credit.'

'Not bad, but it all depends on good acting. It is a pity life's success cannot be as well assured beforehand as a play,' said Magdalen.

'What? Assured by good acting?'

'Yes, when good earnest fails.'

Frank Milton adored fishing more than ever during this period of probation; Magdalen in her new mood upset his calculations; he was rather sorry for Leslie, for he could not doubt that if Miss Cuthbert resolved on conquest she would succeed. This play seemed the last link in the chain of

events, but outsiders, we are told, see more of the game than the actors themselves, and strangely enough something was taking place which no one could have foreseen. Magdalen had found Brice difficult to attract; she had begun playing with fire, and suddenly she had felt its warmth. Brice was very unlike Percy Chester, but to Magdalen he seemed as if he inherited all the good points in his character and none of the evil. Now and then she suddenly stopped short in some cynical remark, because she knew he would disapprove. Magdalen was angry with herself, and determined not to be conquered. Only one human being had ever enslaved her will and her heart, and she had long ago resolved that none other should do it again. Had she been entirely devoid of noble qualities she would have been able to keep this resolution; as it was, she was horrified to find herself caring—yes, caring for Brice's good opinion.

As for Brice, he shut his eyes to everything; he called nothing by its right name, and he refused to see that he was running into danger. Miss Cuthbert was beautiful, clever, fascinating, but how plainly also could he see her faults—and a lover

never sees faults; there was but one perfect woman for him, and that was Griselda Foy. In the meanwhile 'Unlimited Credit' was studied; now and then the two began to rehearse, till laughter or discussion made them break off.

Magdalen one day found herself dressing in blue, because Brice had admired that colour. When she realised what she was doing, she paused before her pier glass, and blushing, even though she was alone, angrily threw off the dress.

'No,' she murmured, 'let him like the colour I wear; why should I care about his taste? That weakness was only for *him*, only for him, and he did not care enough; but I was not altogether mistaken; for this man—this Brice—he loved him, knowing everything. Brice is a true friend. Brice—Brice. No, the name cannot raise the same echo as Percy. I am a fool, a fool!' Then she leant back in the great arm-chair near the window and softly hummed an old French song—

'Hellas! pourquoy m'a-t-il lessée?
Je ne luy ay ne fait ne dit
J'avoye mys mon amour en luy,
Mais je voy bien qu'il m'a trompée

Que veux tu que je te donne?
Je t'ai deja trop donné:
Je t'ai donné une rose,
La plus belle de mes roses
Que j'avais sur mon rosier.'

'There it is,' she thought, 'the thing is as old as creation. I am not the first woman who has been forsaken and left with a bare rose-bush. What is the worth of a late autumn bud? It has no scent, it only looks ridiculous.'

Even as she spoke, however, she noticed Brice below, pacing up and down the terrace; she could see the tall, manly figure, the broad shoulders, the profile *perdu* of the grave, earnest face; the bearing entirely free from the superiority of the sex; and once more she seemed to hear again his few words, 'He was my friend.'

He, Percy, would have liked to have heard those words. If love cannot come twice, then there is something very beautiful in friendship. She rose slowly, and in a deprecating manner she opened a drawer and took from it a soft blue wrap, which she threw in a careless picturesque manner round her shoulders. She had conquered in the question of the dress, but she compromised it with the shawl.

A few moments afterwards the two were walking side by side, but the usual flow of conversation was conspicuous by its absence. Silence is sometimes very unwise in spite of its being called golden by the proverb.

This little episode took place only three days before the play was to be acted, and it was the same day on which Lady Mary received a letter from Griselda, saying how much she would have liked to accept her invitation, but she had already promised to stay with her cousins, the Hopes, at the Rectory. If she might come and see the play and help in any possible way, she would be delighted to do so.

Lady Mary tossed the note lightly towards Magdalen. The gentlemen had already gone out; now that some practical results were required, Frank Milton gave up his fishing, and he and Brice were delighted to turn carpenters, to plan, paint, and put up rustic seats. A stage was erected; carpenters came from the village, one from town, bringing with him an upholsterer, who found that instead of telling his employer what was the fashion, he had only meekly to listen, take

orders, and if he deviated from the right road he had to retrace his steps. Rosehill was closely shut off from the outer world, for on the important day everything was to be surprise. Even the weather-glass appeared to behave with wonderful consideration, going down a little, and then making a bound upwards on the evening of the rehearsal. There were slight drawbacks, but not many, the generalship had been too superb. The supper-tent sent from London had mirrors down its seams. Frank Milton, exclaimed in dismay that an artist could not endure this, but flowers were soon procured to hide this barbarism.

Just before the rehearsal, Brice Leslie had a note given to him. It was from Griselda, telling him of her arrival, and begging him to come and see her that evening, if possible, or, if not, to come the next morning. There was more than enough to do, so he really found it impossible to comply with her request that evening, for the actor who had to play the butler did not turn up, and Brice read the part. Lady Mary often wanted a messenger, and Frank appreciated Brice's engineering skill, whilst even Magdalen appealed to him. The result of the

rehearsal, however, was brilliant; at least, Lady Mary smiled when it was over; she knew that any small hitch or imperfection would disappear on the next night. The trial illumination was successful; Rosehill gardens looked like fairyland, and in the midst of all this her ladyship had time to note progress in her love-story.

'The experiment has been successful; if Magdalen is not in love I do not know womankind; and as for Brice Leslie—but that was a foregone conclusion, given the Magdalen's wish for such a realisation.' Thus, to herself, spoke the brilliant hostess of Rosehill.

The day of the play dawned at last—hot, cloudless, a dry heat which betokened no great continuance of this perfection of weather, but which drove away fears of rheumatism. There was little left to be done; Lady Mary hated hurry and flurry, calmness being an essential part of her talent.

'We are ready,' she said after breakfast, 'and I must congratulate you, Mr. Leslie. Of course I knew all about Miss Cuthbert's talent beforehand, but really last night you seemed to understand

each other perfectly.' Lady Mary tried to say this in an indifferent manner, but Magdalen answered—

'There is nothing much to understand in such a simple part, and the professional kindly praised me. I admire the way they scorn us, as if ladies did not understand being themselves better than any of them can play at being some one else. But if you don't mind, Mr. Leslie, I should prefer rehearsing the last scene once again presently.'

'Of course.' Then Brice remembered that he was not a free man this morning, and found an excuse, but not the real one. Magdalen believed it, and agreed to put off rehearsing till later on in the afternoon.

The Rectory was some ten minutes' walk from Rosehill, and it would not take Brice long to reach the pretty gabled house, but he walked slowly all the way. He felt as if he were in a dream. He did not argue out anything, he was in a dazed state of mind which he did not analyse. Why should he?

When he reached the Vicarage, he was met by Mrs. Hope, a little woman of great common sense but of small imagination.

'How do you do, Mr. Leslie? How curious you should come just now. Griselda said most likely you would call, as you are neighbours at home and know her people so well; but the dear child has sacrificed herself; she is playing the organ, and she has undertaken a choir practice to save me, the schoolmaster having gone away for his holiday. I can't ask you to go to the church, as it disturbs the boys to see strangers; do stay an hour, and then she will be free.'

'How could Griselda be so good-natured! thought Brice. Should he stay? No, he might be wanted. He took out his card and wrote at the back of it—

'So sorry not to see you, but I must run back. Come early. Lady Mary expects you, but I fear I shall be invisible till after the play. B. L.'

Then he said a few nothings to Mrs. Hope, and instead of altering his course, returned the way he came, much as did the disobedient prophet of old.

He was not rewarded: the small drawing-room was empty; the large one was taken up with actors, servants, people coming and going, and, impatient of circumstances, Brice Leslie, still in

his dreamy mood, wandered out into the shrubberies, then slowly he made his way to the summer-house. He sat down and gazed at the scene before him. The distant corn was partly reaped, the remainder was bending with a slight undulating motion, causing shadowed ripples to appear on its indented surface. Beyond, dark green trees surrounded with a soft haze of heat, hills of deep blue, then more distant blue trees, and coming towards him on waves of softest air sweet sounds of nature were audible—the skylark's calls, the softest buzz of gnats, the passing bees, the dull drone of the humble-bee, the bursting of fir-cones like miniature artillery reports from the muskets of some fairy regiments. Then all at once the summer-house seemed too confined for him, he walked slowly out of it and stretched himself down on the delicious heather, here growing high and tender. Everything around him was blue and beautiful, and after a long time a portion of the blue sky above him seemed to detach itself and suddenly to become a soft down-like cloud. From it rose a beautiful head with waving hair in rich profusion, blue eyes full of deep meaning and scornful sadness changing

into unutterable yearning—and then, blotting out everything came a smile, good heavens! a smile sweet enough to turn a man's brain, so full was it of softness and tenderness, such as he had never seen before.

He sprang to his feet and found Magdalen by his side. Not knowing what he did, he held out his hand, but he said nothing. Suddenly the smile in her face died away, the lips quivered, and very gently she put her hand into his, but she too was silent.

In another moment, however, Magdalen's voice broke the stillness.

'I came to fetch you,' she said, and suddenly she let go his hand; but it was too late, he had felt her touch in his innermost being; outwardly he remained calm and followed her, merely saying 'thank you,' but his whole soul was transformed, his life changed.

That was the real play they played—what was to follow was merely a farce!

CHAPTER XII

THERE is a certain class of French writers who appear to have been apprenticed—for a year at least—to the most fashionable upholsterer of the time, so clever are they in their descriptions of furniture and of dress. This inventory-taking is not a difficult trade to learn, but the question remains whether it in any way conduces to make the reader realise the room, the place, even the women whose clothes are so minutely transcribed for them. Take a Van Beere and a Claude Monet place them side by side, and you will have no difficulty in deciding that the first, with its wonderful finish, is on the verge of being vulgar, whilst the other at once raises the imagination to a high level. In like manner a reader's imagination supplies far truer details than word-painting can ever give, details which, instead of diminishing from the effect, serve to enhance it.

The French author, however, was not present at Lady Mary's party at Rosehill, yet some English author certainly must have been there, who, on this occasion, turned journalist or reporter, for, the next day, the London evening papers described the lively scene, and the day after the county journals had full details, though most of these were not true to life. The chief names were, of course, duly chronicled, though they became slightly altered before the world read their titles. The Duke of Blackwater was said to be accompanied by the Duchess, the truth being her Grace was not there; but two of the Duke's fair and stout daughters took her place, whilst their brother, Lord Colefoot, came direct from London, he having been in town 'on business' of his own invention.

Titles, like silver in the days of Solomon, were of no account that evening. Their owners hoped, by their presence and their affability, to secure a promise of a picture; but Frank Milton was, to use a common expression (trade and art have interchanged terms), booked for two years ahead; he therefore accepted the many gracious smiles he received as a personal tribute to Lady Mary. The

business of the guests was to admire his wife and her unique party, on which occasion the fashionable artist had turned into a stage-manager. Of course there were brother artists there; one of them remarked that stage-painting was more in Milton's line than portraits, whilst the great Tongham put up his eyeglass and said 'Humph'—an expression which meant he was thankful he was not another inglorious Milton.

The local papers expatiated on the ladies' dresses and on the illumination. They made jokes on the stars, the shining eyes of the galaxy of beauty. Another *Evening News* understood that the play had been written for the occasion and had been rehearsed a hundred times, so no wonder the acting was so perfect. The *South Courier* remarked that the well-known and much-admired Miss Cuthbert acted divinely, and was said to bear away the palm from Miss Lottie Linden of the Star Theatre, which paragraph made Miss Lottie throw down the paper in disgust, and mutter something about the snobbism of county papers, but she too, at the bottom of her heart, had admired Miss Cuthbert's performance, never having seen such

good acting in any one who was not 'in the profession.'

As for the illuminations, the descriptions all agreed that such tastefully-arranged festoons of light had never been seen before. Such a union of art and nature had seldom been so successfully accomplished, and Lady Mary's luck in having a perfectly hot and dry evening was unprecedented. All the fine descriptions both pleased and saddened the persons who were not present.

Oliver Selby had come early, but he was in such a nervous and anxious state of mind that he wished himself away. He carefully avoided the great Acton Roland, who sat in a vast arm-chair worthy of the sitter's proportions, and listened attentively, applauded seldom, and kept his opinion wrapped away in his own soul. If many hang on your words, it is wiser the words should be few, and Acton Roland feared and avoided private theatricals as other people fear and avoid a cholera-stricken district. Only an immense belief in Lady Mary, and a wish to have his name mentioned after or before that of the Duke of Blackwater, drew him to Rosehill; but he was heard to say afterwards

that really he had thoroughly enjoyed himself; that well, yes, he had not refused to have young Oliver Selby introduced to him.

This latter was so much perturbed when he was presented to the great man, that, in reply to his remark, 'A very nice play, Mr. Selby, allow me to congratulate you,' he stammered forth—

'Yes, it is a very nice play—I mean, it might be improved.'

'I was going to say so,' said the owner of the Parthenon. 'In fact that is what most struck me in it.'

'Yes, of course,' said Oliver Selby, recovering his self-possession, 'it could be altered, but the alterations might not improve it.' The great man put his eye-glasses again in their exact position and looked his author over from head to foot; then he said to himself that Selby was not a fool, and secretly decided that he would take the play and try it at the Parthenon, with alterations, of course, though even with amateurs it had acted splendidly.

'Alterations certainly *would* improve it; your end is poor, the stage would require something

better finished. But if you will call upon me in six weeks' time, I shall be pleased to discuss it with you; after that we can see. By Jove, though, that Miss Cuthbert is a loss to the stage.'

Lady Mary had been as good as her word, it *was* a Roland for her Oliver.

But this conversation is premature.

The company were asked to come at eight o'clock, and this time curiosity made them punctual. As the party was not to be the usual entertainment known by the name of a 'Squash,' those invited did not put off their carriages till the last possible moment; but some time before the first of the carriage-folk was announced Griselda Foy appeared at Rosehill.

She wanted to help in the preparations as much as possible, and further she was prepared to enjoy herself. She had been much disappointed at having missed Brice, but she knew that he was busy, and she was not going to worry him on account of her disappointment.

Mr. and Mrs. Hope were to come later—Lady Mary had made an exception in their favour; but Griselda, wrapping a cloak over her white dress,

entered the Rosehill grounds soon after seven o'clock. The hostess was giving a last look round. As she caught sight of this first guest she was suddenly struck by the girl's unconsciousness of her own Undine-like beauty and simplicity, a simplicity which had nothing inane or silly about it. Some men, she thought, would fall in love with her at first sight, not a man like Brice, but still—was there any danger? It was only a stray thought that flashed through her brain, and she dismissed it at once. The next moment she was the gracious hostess.

'I am so glad to see you, Miss Foy, you see I am not dressed yet. What do you say of the present appearance of the lawn? The grand transformation scene will come later, but these summer-houses full of flowers and twinkling lights have already a pretty effect. The guests are to explore the domain at their own sweet will, and the stage is only to be revealed when the play is ready to begin. Every one likes a little surprise, a childish feeling one never gets over.'

'It is like fairyland,' said Griselda. 'What can I do to make it still more perfect? In New

Zealand we should never have thought of all this, though we had such exquisite flowers all about us.'

'Art and nature can combine in practised hands. But come into the house, I want little bouquets made up—that is, if you will condescend to help Miss Cuthbert, who is doing them all alone.'

'I should like it above all things,' said Griselda.

She was longing to see again the divinity whom she had so much admired.

In another minute she was in her presence. Magdalen was dressed in a beautifully-fitting tea-gown of wondrous salmon-coloured silk. She was not to be seen on the stage till the right moment, so she had offered to manipulate flowers. She looked up as Lady Mary introduced Griselda, and a sudden idea also struck her, so vague and undefined, however, that she did not frame it into words—

'Here is our brave New Zealand amazon,' said Lady Mary. 'I think, Magdalen, she looks now more like an Undine fresh from the spring. Make her useful, I must dress and see to a few last details, so that nothing shall fail.'

Magdalen paused a moment, and as if by common consent the two looked at each other in silence. Griselda was thinking how beautiful and how fascinating was her companion, and Magdalen said to herself, 'she is his neighbour.' Then a smile parted her lips at the bare idea that there could be any rivalry between them. Rivalry! Why? What about? She had not given in—not yet, even though her heart still beat quicker at the remembrance of that meeting near the summer-house, where Brice had so clearly, if mutely, revealed his soul to her.

'Sit down, Miss Foy, you must not soil your hands or your gloves with these flowers, but I am glad of your company. What did you think just now of your first peep at Lady Mary's fairyland?'

'It *is* fairyland! How fortunate that it is such a warm evening; everything is perfect; and the play, *that* I am sure will be perfect too, if—if you are to act in it.'

Griselda's eyes expressed her admiration, and for a moment Magdalen smiled. She was not so much accustomed to the admiration of her own sex as to make this homage unpleasant; on the

contrary, it gave her intense satisfaction, for Miss Foy was herself beautiful, though of such a different type of beauty. A new conquest is more appreciated, if it is itself worth conquering.

'Lady Mary will not countenance imperfection, when personal labour can procure something good. We are all on our honour to help her to achieve success. Her plans never fail. Besides, we were fortunate in getting Mr. Leslie's support.'

'Mr. Leslie used to help us often in New Zealand with our childish charades; I know he can act well,' said Griselda simply, and she hid a smile of happiness in a half-blown rose. The utterly natural manner of the white Undine reassured Magdalen.

'You are young enough to enjoy everything,' said the elder woman, with a faint sigh. 'Once I could do the same. Well, we have enough bouquets, I think, but this rose is a dream of perfect beauty. Ah! I see where it should live—and die.'

She walked across the room and pinned the flower on Griselda's dress, where already a much less beautiful blossom was reposing. 'Let me change this; with your white dress and your fair

hair, you will be like a moonbeam. Shall you be sitting with Mrs. Hope? I shall look out for you.'

Griselda was young, enthusiastic, simple, loving and spontaneous. She shyly kissed the hand that had pinned in the rose.

'Thank you, how kind, and—how beautiful you are!' she said, from the bottom of her heart.

Magdalen laughed softly. There was no bitterness in her laugh this time; she was happy, consciously happy, she knew why, and yet would not acknowledge it; some of her beautiful far-off youth seemed to have come back to her and once more whispered the word happiness in her ear. Was it a St. Luke's summer in her life? a mirage in the desert? No, not a mirage—a wonderful reality; it was close to her, she felt that her hand could grasp it—the hand that Brice had touched.

'My dear child, you must go now,' she said softly, and kissed the peach-like cheek of Griselda Foy; 'you are young, that in itself is worth any beauty. If you find happiness, keep it, don't let it go—if you can help it; do you read Shelley? No? he says that "joy once lost is pain."'

'You ought to have nothing but happiness,' said

Griselda, and there were tears in her blue eyes. 'Happiness is—oh, isn't it beautiful!'

At that moment Mr. Hope knocked at the door and claimed Griselda.

'Come, Griselda, every one is arriving, and you ought to lose nothing of the sight.'

Miss Cuthbert was already gone before Griselda could look round for her, and, still smiling with pleasure at the remembrance of her, she followed the Rector into the gardens.

The entrance gates once passed, the company walked through a hedge of roses illuminated with garlands of electric lights, also hung in fantastic festoons all about a large pavilion, where their wraps were taken from them. Soft music was heard in the near distance when the guests again stepped out upon the lawns to be enchanted by art hidden in multitudinous ways. On one side were seats where roses appeared to twine themselves naturally, and round which lights were twinkling in coloured pear-like globes. Some of the avenues were partly lighted, partly in gloom, so that from shade you walked into a sudden blaze of flowers and lights. Rich carpets were spread in sheltered

nooks side by side with heather banks, near which were placed rustic tables, whereon choice wines and fairy-like cakes were arrayed ready for the guests to partake of when it suited their fancy, no attendants being by. Next the wondering guests discovered a concert was going on unannounced, performed for the sake of the music itself, and apparently only for such guests as loved sweet sounds, and, further on, a mimic fairy dance of children, children who were apparently enjoying themselves and not exhibiting. Everything had been done to delight the sense of the unexpected, and the guests at once responded to the call made on their imaginative faculties, and were ready to be delighted.

'We thought that Lady Mary would fail in the country,' said the Duke, 'but the verdict must be that she has excelled herself.'

On the lawn near the house the hostess held her court. Frank went here and there collecting his wife's praises. He was simple, hearty, pleasant, always himself, but Lady Mary was of course the chief attraction. She had a part to play as well as the actors, and she did not mean to fail in it.

Instead of remaining in one place to become a hand-shaking machine, she went about among the various groups. She introduced friends to each other's notice, reminded the Duke that he knew the Colonel, or the Rear-Admiral who crossed his path; she thought that Lady Dash must have met Lord Groves at the Inner Temple ball. 'Here is Mr. Harcourt, the leading spirit of that ball—for the wicked barristers were lavish of money, so that if poorer in coin they were rich in friends. It was certainly a good example. Your money can be taken from you, but your friends—'

'*Your* friends, Lady Mary,' said the Duke, bowing, 'would remain true to you.'

'Or retire gracefully.'

'You think ill of us,' said Colonel Karstairs, 'I cannot agree with you.' Lady Mary lightly placed her hand on his arm, to walk with him towards a mossy bower close at hand.

'To judge by appearances, I should believe in your steadfastness,' she said, smiling; 'but, don't protest, your constancy is useless. I know you are looking out for Miss Cuthbert!'

'I thought the Magdalen was sure to be here—

nothing more, I assure you,' said the Colonel, looking round with an earnest expression on his face in spite of his bantering tone, and then he added—

'By the way, the other day Horton was recalling your confident prophecy—I will not call it a wager.'

'Hush! it shocks Frank—still, if it had been possible, my dear Colonel, I would have abetted your suit, but what can I do? it is only the unexpected that pleases. You town gallants are too conventional in your courting, you do not fully understand that it is more blessed to give than to receive.'

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders—

'We like obstacles, but not too many! After a time we begin to doubt whether the game is worth the hunting.'

'Fie! on the contrary, she is superlative.'

'Superlatively happy in possessing you as a friend. On my honour you have outwitted nature, Lady Mary; I shall go home and write sonnets on the superiority of art over nature.'

'Then pray don't mention the electric light.

Frank is afraid of admiring it, because some of our great artists—Tongham among them—have sniffed at it; but Soames, you know the man who paints pretty women and makes them hideous on principle, says, "Art must bend to our will. True art repudiates nature." After that, I assure you I breathed more freely, and gloried openly in electric light. It all depends on your mental focus.'

'You need not fear. This is a triumph.—By the way, is the choice fruit here?' Lady Mary pretended to misunderstand him.

'Yes, under the beeches; go and help the ladies, I have done away with waiters. As to triumph, wait till you see my play.'

The Duke came up again.

'Lady Mary, there is a young lady whom the men are all raving about. She is dressed in white, and hair *à l'oriole*—isn't that the right phrase? She certainly has been till now well concealed, for no one knows her.'

'Ah, my New Zealander! Yes, a denizen of another world, too good for ours.'

'And her name—Queen Mab, in person?'

'Miss Foy, of Foy Lodge. Alas, no princely

fortune to be expected from her, Duke. Her face is her fortune.'

'In my young days we thought that princely, but times are changed.'

'American heiresses have ruined the beauty market. The balance at the banker—'

'Strikes the balance at the heart.'

'If you will honour my poor fête with *bon-mots*, I shall introduce you to a real heiress, — Miss Betham might—'

The Duke laughed and retired. It was known he wanted money for his eldest son, and Lord Colefoot had been given to understand that he must fall in love with a money-bag.

Why chronicle more of the light banter? Lady Mary made wit sparkle; she called forth praise from those who possessed originality; and evidently received a blessing from the evening air, that so softly played among the folds of the beautiful dresses, and kissed the wavy curls of youth, not forgetting to stroke the grey hair of old age.

Suddenly a sound of Indian gongs was heard, and bells chimed a melody. Every one knew the

moment had come when the players were to amuse the company, but every guest was already so well pleased that even indifferent actors would have been applauded by them, always excepting of course the mighty Acton Roland, who had been taking mental notes, and was secretly sorry that Lady Mary did not own a theatre and could not become Mrs. Roland; 'because,' thought he, 'in that line the woman is inspired. She is a great loss to the profession.'

A portion of the grounds, before invisible, was now suddenly illuminated, and, without needing to be told, the guests walked on down a shrub-bordered path, brilliantly lighted; then, emerging upon a large open space, they beheld an amphitheatre of seats carpeted with green cloth and adorned with roses, whilst along the sides were roses arched over uncovered seats for those who preferred the night air. Opposite was the stage, festooned with electric lights, such a blaze of light and flowers seemed fashioned for fairyland alone.

The murmur of applause was not faint, for even this company (for the most part *blasé*) was fascinated.

There was no crowding, every one appeared to have a special seat reserved for them, and the men did not on this occasion prefer to remain standing outside.

Griselda, seated near Mrs. Hope, found several attentive men in her neighbourhood, for this fresh apparition was attracting unusual admiration. The smile that was so real, the manners that were so natural, were not such as could be found every day in London society; for one season often gives a simper to a belle, and affectation to a country beauty, who little guesses that her airs and graces afford amusement to the men who collect to gossip at their club.

When the curtain rose, Griselda had only eyes and ears for the play; with her arms folded, she leaned a little forward and drank in every word, noticed every gesture. Was not her Brice there? and the beautiful Miss Cuthbert, whom she so much admired? What mattered a duke's son or a young guardsman to her—what, indeed?

Mr. Acton Roland was just behind her, and, once or twice hearing his remarks, Griselda turned round and smiled her assent; she really smiled at Lady

Mary, who was all smiles, but Mr. Roland joined in and condescended to agree with her.

'By Jove,' said Lord Colefoot afterwards, 'I sat near Miss Foy, the girl who will make a sensation next season—a New Zealander; but she didn't know how to flirt, and one could enjoy her remarks. If she had money—but they say she is poor; anyhow, she is not jealous of other women, she did nothing but praise the only rival that could come near to her; Miss Cuthbert, well—yes, she carried everything before her that evening. She knows the arts and sciences of making a sensation.'

As for the play—this was the plot of it.

CHAPTER XIII

THE curtain drew up and displayed a severe-looking library, where Sir Anthony Croft was seated in his arm-chair, engaged in a serious conversation with his son and heir, young Marmaduke.

Griselda laughed softly as she noticed how handsome and young-looking Brice appeared, in a new suit of very fashionably-cut garments.

Sir Anthony was extremely comic in his declamation, and in the way he took all Marmaduke's silence for consent. He solemnly expressed his thankfulness that his heir was not like some eldest sons, whose sad stories often gave shocking interest to the newspapers. All this part was very briskly acted, and the audience at once caught the cue, when the Baronet said, sententiously, 'But *you*, Marmaduke, you cannot tell a spade from a club;

for every one knows that not one pack of cards could be found here, even if the Manor were ransacked from top to toe, not one.' Marmaduke's slight smile, and deprecating glance as he answered, 'I am sure of that, sir,' made every one laugh heartily. At the end of the interview, Marmaduke asks his father's consent to leave home on urgent business connected with—here a pause and great hesitation — literary employment. Sir Anthony appears charmed with the idea of his son's future fame as an author, but begs him to return as soon as possible. Sir Anthony's exit is followed by the arrival of Marmaduke's friend and neighbour in the county, Hector Sandley. Their conversation discloses that Marmaduke is so deeply in debt, led on by Sandley, that he does not know where to turn for money, and, of course, dares not appeal to his father's mercy. 'He has no mercy for gambling,' the unfortunate young man repeats; 'and if Mr. Bruce, our new family lawyer, cannot help me, I had better leave the country at once, before my father announces that he cuts me off with a shilling. If I can get out of this scrape, I swear it shall be my last.' Hector laughs at his

distress, wishes him good luck, and promises to look him up when he next goes to town; whereupon Marmaduke, in his despair, tells him some plain truths about his evil influence, and they separate in anger.

The curtain here fell merely for a few minutes. How the whole scene was shifted so quickly was a secret which puzzled even Acton Roland. It was wonderful for amateurs, he thought. This time the company gazed at an exquisite bijou drawing-room, where a pretty blonde was arranging flowers, and talking to herself in a way probably only indulged in on the stage, where this unnatural habit plays the part of the old Greek chorus.

Meta Bruce, the lawyer's daughter, discusses the advantage of matrimony, and the delights of her friendship with the newly-arrived inmate of their house, Esther Singleton, who, being an independent heiress, has found a temporary home with the Bruces. Meta is young, confiding, and kitten-like; and the contrast to Esther, the heiress, was at once apparent when Miss Cuthbert, in that character, stepped on the stage. There was a murmur of applause from the ladies, and a vigorous clapping

from the men, for Magdalen was perfectly and most becomingly dressed, and acted admirably. You saw at once that she was made of sterner stuff, and was of a more determined character, than the artless Meta.

'Isn't she perfectly beautiful?' Griselda murmured to Mrs. Hope; but this lady had already heard of Magdalen's fame, and answered severely, 'Yes, a handsome woman, but very fast and worldly, I believe.'

'No, that must be a mistake, I am sure it is,' said Griselda warmly; 'look, here comes Mr. Leslie, doesn't he exactly look his part?'

Marmaduke is introduced into the charmed circle of the lawyer's drawing-room, and his eyes at once rest on Meta, who comes forward, explains that her father is out, but begs him to wait for him. Esther has stayed in the background, and by the time she comes forward Marmaduke has already fallen under the spell of Meta. Mr. Bruce's return disturbs the trio, the girls retire, and Marmaduke explains his situation. He frankly confesses his sins, his utter inability to satisfy his creditors—chiefly a certain Jew, Joseph Levy; and owns that

unless he can procure five thousand pounds in a week, he will not be able to prevent the Jew from appealing to his father. 'And that, sir, will, I verily believe, kill the old man, who believes me as innocent as a baby in arms.'

Mr. Bruce considers how he can help this young fellow, to whom he takes an immediate fancy, without plunging him deeper into debt; and, to make sure that he will be out of harm's way, invites him to stay at his country-house till he finds a way out of the difficulty.

During the week Marmaduke makes himself so much at home, and so happy with the two ladies, that he believes himself a reformed character. He is so attentive to both Meta and Esther that he hardly knows which he prefers, and pays them both great attention. During the week Mr. Bruce tells Esther how the case stands, and she immediately forms the design of freeing the charming Marmaduke from the clutches of the Jew; but binds Mr. Bruce to secrecy, as she hands him a cheque of five thousand pounds, which at last Mr. Bruce unwillingly gives to Marmaduke. This latter naturally believes Mr. Bruce is the real

donor, and forms at once the plan of proposing to his daughter, as the best way he can imagine of repaying the debt of gratitude; besides, when he begins to think of it, Marmaduke finds he is really in love with the charming Meta.

The love scene which followed was very prettily worked up. Marmaduke, in a frank, natural manner, making his confession how he had formed the idea of marrying Meta from gratitude, but that now he truly loves her. Meta is at once carried away by the young man's words, and thinks him the most noble, the most generous of lovers; but Marmaduke at the end imposes one condition upon her. In his present position they must keep their engagement a secret till he is entirely free of debt; as Mr. Bruce might, under the circumstances, make some objection; but that, when he can again hold up his head, he will at once speak to her father and to his. Meta, knowing nothing of Esther's generosity, or the feeling which has called it forth, willingly agrees to the condition. In another scene, Marmaduke, to avoid detection, pays Esther more attention than he does to Meta, and the former allows herself to

believe in him, and glories in the idea that her generosity has saved him.

The day before Marmaduke is going to speak to Mr. Bruce, his tempter Hector turns up. Marmaduke tells him he has paid his debts, that he has turned over a new leaf, and that he is on the eve of proposing to the sweetest angel on earth. Hector, with ingenious and devilish cleverness, turns him round, and they go out together—the spectators easily guessing the result.

The next scene represents Esther sitting alone at an open window. Meta and her father have gone out to a dinner party. Esther hears a noise, and recognises Marmaduke's footstep; she is much agitated, but she has a smile of pleasure on her face. In a few moments the young man rushes in, looking utterly crushed and wretched. Esther is frightened, but intensely sympathetic, and her sympathy causes Marmaduke to confess he has lost a large sum of money at gambling, that he is utterly undone, for his father has heard of it, and that he believes he is following him and may appear at any moment.

Esther goes hastily to the writing-table and

writes a cheque for the amount. In spite of the large sum, she signs her name with a smile on her lips. Then she comes towards Marmaduke, for he has sunk down in a chair, and has buried his head in his arms. She gently touches his shoulder, as with a look of intense love and happiness on her face she holds out the cheque to him. Marmaduke starts up, looks at her face, then at the cheque, and is speechless. She says softly—

'You have guessed the truth.'

'What truth?'

'That unlimited credit is only the privilege of true affection.'

She hands him the cheque. He draws back, and mutters 'Impossible,' and Esther answers—

'Take it, it is possible. I know your generous nature—if you are weak, you are incapable of meanness, and I am determined to save you.

A noise is heard, and the servant announces that Mr. Joseph Levy desires to speak with Mr. Marmaduke Croft, at the same time he hands him a telegram from Sir Anthony, which he tears open and reads. 'I know all, and will come by next train.'

When the door is shut, Esther comes towards him again, and again puts the cheque in his hand. 'Go,' she says, 'get rid of that vile Jew, and, when he comes, let your father find you a free man.'

Marmaduke again hesitates, touches the cheque, and staggers.

'My father!—he believed in me, it will kill him; but I cannot, you do not know—you will never forgive.'

'Forgive?' then in a very low tone she adds, 'Love forgives everything.'

'Love—I love too much to—' He passes his hands over his eyes, hardly knowing what he says. Esther mistakes his words, and comes back hastily, and passionately throws her arms round him.

Levy's voice is heard; there is a knock at the door, and Esther starts back, repeating—

'Go, go, give it to him at once, for your father's sake and for mine.'

Marmaduke snatches the paper, and as the Jew enters thrusts it into his hands. The Jew stares in amazement, then slowly sits down to write the receipt.

As the Jew goes out, Sir Anthony hastens in,

pale and furious. Marmaduke stands conscience-stricken before him, without uttering a word. As Sir Anthony pours forth a flood of reproaches, Esther returns, looks round with a proud smile on her face, and goes up to the old man.

'Forgive him,' she says; then she walks across to Marmaduke's side and slips her hand through his arm. 'Forgive him, and forget; he is free of debt—all is paid. It is the last time this shall happen.'

Sir Anthony, astonished, asks for an explanation, and Marmaduke says huskily—

'Yes, here is the woman who has saved me, saved *us* from disgrace. I owe her everything, everything I have,—even my name, if she will take it.'

The door opens, and Meta and her father return from the party.

Meta is charmingly dressed, and looks bewitchingly happy. She has heard of Sir Anthony's arrival, and believes the happy moment has come when Marmaduke will openly declare his love.

On entering, however, she sees Esther blushingly withdrawing her arm from Marmaduke's, but, thinking only of her lover's approaching confession,

she goes towards him, saying, 'You have come back to-day, I knew you would, I felt sure of it.' Marmaduke draws back from her, and Meta pausing, astonished, looks from him to the radiant Esther.

'Wish me joy, Meta,' this latter says, 'Marmaduke is safe now for ever; together we will, God helping us, forget the past. Sir Anthony forgives everything.'

Mr. Bruce and Sir Anthony walk away towards the window, and Meta, turning pale and clinging to a chair, looks at her lover and sees only intense sorrow and shame on his face. She guesses the truth, and with a great effort she walks slowly up to Esther, and, hiding her face on her shoulder, says, half sobbing half laughing, in a strange manner, 'I do, I do wish you joy.'

Sir Anthony again coming forward, begs Esther to come with him and Mr. Bruce, and explains to them all her wonderful generosity.

Marmaduke and Meta are left alone, and a scene between them begins by a few moments of intense silence; he sits down, and gradually hides his face on his arms, and she very slowly comes

towards him and calls him by his name. When she is close to him, Marmaduke answers, heart-broken, 'Leave me.'

'No, no, I cannot,' she says passionately, 'we have loved each other, we do still, or is it all a dream? No, no, it cannot be—I see it all; Esther has been so noble, so generous; you thought to—' Marmaduke shakes his head.

'It was not that,' he begins, then pauses; he cannot betray another woman or explain how she has misunderstood him, or how he has allowed her to clear him and save his father's name from being dragged before the public. He suddenly kneels down and kisses the hem of Meta's dress—he dare not do more, and she, slowly stooping, picks up her train and gathering it about her walks slowly back, as if she were afraid of being too near to the man she idolises. Marmaduke gets up and watches her retreating figure, makes a step or two forward, and then sinks down on a high carved oak settee, his face expressing mute agony. When he hears Meta step on the pavement (she had gone through a side French window into a conservatory), he starts up with a cry, runs forward, and folds

Meta in his arms, but again she releases herself and pushes him gently back to the settee, saying—

'Good-bye, Marmaduke, God bless you.' Then she disappears.

When Esther re-enters, she finds Marmaduke still sitting on the settee, stupefied and dazed by what he has gone through; misunderstanding the reason, she comes and kneels down before him and takes his hands in hers.

'Marmaduke,' she says, 'all is forgiven; take courage, the future is grand and beautiful, we will do everything together, your father will let us have the Tower House, and we shall be—oh, so happy! We will look after the cottages and learn all the new improvements. My money—our money, I mean—will be useful, and we shall only come to town when we are tired of each other, Marmaduke—that will be very, very seldom, my dearest; do not be sad any longer. I do not regret anything; indeed, indeed, it is true, and some day we shall be able to—why, almost to laugh at this trouble, and your father will forget that he ever found you less perfect than he once believed you to be—you are perfect for me, I do not wish you other

than you are. Marmaduke, look at me; together, together, we can conquer everything—by love!'

Marmaduke rises from his seat and takes Esther's hand in his. Then suddenly he laughs. 'Esther, you are good and noble and generous—you can do everything, I believe, everything; but—good God! can you mend a broken heart?'

. . . . . .

The audience waited almost breathlessly for Esther's answer, but there was none; they only saw a strange expression pass over her face, a startled, horrified look in her eyes, and then the curtain fell. The play was ended.

There was a sudden pause, then a loud clapping and a call for the actors, but Lady Mary, standing up, shook her head.

'It is useless to call for them, our author does not allow it. Those returning scenes are barbarous, and against all rules of idealism, for they destroy every illusion. Now, Mr. Roland, your opinion is the real applause, our young playwright is dying to know it.'

Acton Roland was too cunning to be taken in, but the interview with Oliver took place, as already

recorded, and Lady Mary was satisfied. Even the Duke, a fine connoisseur in plays, from frequent experience, came to shake hands with the author, who did not know whether to be flattered or whether to be on the defensive. He possessed a sensitive character, but a fine literary judgment.

'We must really congratulate you, Mr. Selby—a capital play. Are you satisfied yourself? Upon my word the acting must have pleased even Mr. Roland.'

'Yes, the acting left nothing to be desired,' said Mr. Selby; 'as to the play, I am glad your Grace was pleased.'

'Uncommonly so, but—well, not quite sure as to the end, you know. You stopped short—hem, a little too short, we wanted more of a good thing.'

'Your Grace has been to too many plays: I merely wished to call forth just the feeling you mention.'

'Ah, in that case—' the Duke paused. 'I see you are in league with our hostess; she prefers whetting our appetites to satisfying our desires.'

'Just so, the incomplete has a merit hardly enough recognised.'

'Except in respect of supper,' said Lady Mary, taking the Duke's arm. 'Come to the tent, and there we shall meet our actors. I hope each gentleman will choose the partner he prefers, for to-night at least we waive the commonplaces of etiquette.'

Griselda sat a few moments in her place without moving, she was so much carried away by the play that she heaved a little sigh when Mr. Hope touched her. Something of her innocent belief in life's happiness seemed to have been taken from her.

'Griselda, here is Lord Colefoot, who begs to be introduced to you and to take you down to supper.'

Griselda was gracious at once, but she was not elated. Her heart was not in this grand society; she wanted Brice—her Brice; and all the time the young lord talked on of the 'awfully jolly play,' a vision of the far away New Zealand farm came floating before her mind's eye.

CHAPTER XIV

BEHIND the scenes, when the curtain was lowered for the last time, Magdalen Cuthbert and Brice Leslie remained standing, not in the attitude imposed upon them by the play, but quite naturally, as if they had just finished a conversation. Brice was conscious that Miss Cuthbert had acted extremely well; Magdalen was quickly reviewing her own efforts, and she was satisfied with herself, for she knew that her ideal was high and not easily attained. She it was who first broke the silence.

'We have not disappointed Lady Mary.'

Brice was sorry to return to the commonplace, but he was helped thereto by the appearance of the rest of the company and the hum of general conversation. These were some of the remarks he heard—

'First-rate.' 'Capital.' 'Miss Cuthbert, you were perfect.' 'Not a bad play, but the end!'

'I say,' remarked Captain Standring, who had acted Sir Anthony, 'I'm blessed if I know which girl he did marry—'

'You know nothing of modern art, Captain Standring. We deal only with uncertainties. Those happy-ever-after pieces are out of date.'

Miss Linden, *alias* 'Meta,' came smiling back upon the stage, she had learnt every movement of her part, and had felt none of it; as Lady Mary had said, she was a curious but not an uncommon example of a being endowed with the receptive and dramatic faculty without any deeper motive power. She was a perfect mirror, but there was only common wood behind the reflection.

Magdalen did not care to show that she had felt her part only too deeply.

'I am going to dress,' she said to Brice; 'will you take me to the house by the unilluminated shrubbery?'

Brice was of course ready to act as her escort.

'Why do you take the trouble to change your dress?' he said, as he walked slowly by her side. The quiet and silence of the small path they were in was delicious after the excitement of the play.

It was all the more charming that they could hear the sound of the distant hubbub.

'I want the play to remain in the region of the ideal,' she said.

'If one could command some moments of one's life not to disappear into eternity.'

'If that were possible,' asked Magdalen, laughing a little, though Brice caught a sweeter tone than usual in her voice, 'which moment would you recall?'

'The time just passed—on the stage.'

'What! You would be ready to act all the rest of your life? A tragedy, too!'

Magdalen was drawing him on, but she loved him for being drawn on; yet, though she wanted to hear his remarks, she was not sure that she wished to answer them. She was so certain of her power that she liked to play with it a little while.

'Yet life itself is often only a tragedy,' added Brice slowly. The terrible weight of his position was beginning to press upon him, he had a curious feeling that he was not himself, but that he was personifying Percy Chester.

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'Have we changed places?' said Magdalen, stopping short, just as they reached the private garden door of the house, left open this evening for the inmates of Rosehill. 'You know my secret, we are friends—you said so; well, to-night it seems to me as if the other story was a play. I want to wake again, I want to live a little while, I want to—' she paused, and the words rose to her lips but stopped in her throat—'to love'; but though unspoken they were understood by Brice; aloud she changed them into 'I want to forget.'

He made, however, a show of defiance.

'You belong to the world, that world we hear the murmur of from here; you would find any other life flat and stale, like a mild draught of watered wine; a pastoral makes you laugh.' Brice spoke bitterly and in a low voice.

Magdalen raised her head proudly; her eyes so blue, so beautiful, so defiant, flashed forth her answer.

'And if it did? I have not laughed for years.' Then she hurried away, and Brice woke up to the reality. Woke up—O God! to what reality?

He tore himself away from the open doorway where she had disappeared. Had he followed his

inclination he would have stayed there; he would have waited for her, disregarding every sense of right and fitness; he would have borne her scorn, he would have forgiven her bitter jests, if only he might have been free to answer her. Brice woke up at this moment to the reality! He was overmastered by a passion for a woman whom he had called heartless, worldly; whose life was so artificial that it required much faith to believe she had a heart at all; whose early disappointment had crushed and destroyed what is most beautiful in nature—a woman's forgiveness and a woman's love. It was a terrible awakening for him, Brice Leslie, who all his life had prided himself on his uprightness; who, whilst loving the sinner, had viewed a guilty love with pitying contempt; who had won—alas! with too little difficulty—the pure and young heart of one of earth's angels. The very knowledge of the fact staggered him and almost crushed him.

But Brice, though he now found out his secret, though it stood revealed to him in all its enormity, though he clearly read it in his own heart as he might have read it out of a book suddenly opened before him, was not yet conquered. Now that it

was so clear, now that it glowed as if written in fiery letters upon his brain, he made a brave stride in an opposite direction, he boldly drew his sword to show fight. His mind once made up, he walked slowly but firmly away, along the path he and Magdalen had just trodden. He could mentally hear her very tread, the rustle of her dress, the tones of her voice, and, worst of all, he could recall that play, the delight it had been to watch her; the knowledge he had acquired of her thoughts, and the involuntary show of deeper feeling she had exhibited. Brice saw it all, and how every motion, every look, had increased the love that mastered him.

'Griselda will be expecting me,' he said, half aloud. 'I must go back to her, to Griselda.' He wanted the sweet name to bring back his peace of mind, he wanted to wake from this mad dream, he who had laughed to scorn the very idea of loving this unloveable woman,—he, Brice Leslie, who was engaged to Griselda Foy. She whose beauty and youth and innocence was admired on all sides, rose before his mind's eyes, as the vision of the Blessed Virgin might appear to a devout and ardent

Catholic; but for that very reason Griselda belonged entirely, or so it now seemed to him, to a region of pure idealism, though in reality she possessed a fund of fresh joy which was intensely human. Her very beauty was too perfect, too unconscious, too ignorant of its own charms, too wanting in the enticing aggressiveness of a less innocent nature, to be able to cope with the fascination of Magdalen Cuthbert.

Brice saw it all, saw how dangerous had been the temptation within reach of which he had voluntarily placed himself, and how complete had been his fall, a fall which he had not expected, but which he now saw was merely the natural consequence of his actions.

He could not even accuse Magdalen, for how could she know about Griselda? No, she did not know it, she had not even guessed his secret. If she cared about him, it was a true feeling, for there was no reason, no material advantage about him to tempt her into false love; what they felt was the unexplainable mysterious soul-attraction of two human beings. Then suddenly he asked himself, 'But does she care, or is she merely

pretending, playing with me as she has done with many others, and am I going to drop a substance for a worthless shadow? The idea was crushing but wholesome; it gave him a new strength, so that he felt capable of renouncing his own inclination, and struggling on in the old safe path, or, metaphor apart, it made him walk hastily to the supper-tent to seek out Griselda.

In the open doorway the scene was one of brilliant mirth and fascinating enjoyment. Lady Mary, looking her best, was in animated conversation with the Duke, and the rest of the company were also in the full swing of conversation. There were but two empty chairs representing the absent guests, and these were placed next to each other, the rest of the actors having already made their way to their tent to enjoy the choice things provided for the company. These two seats awaited—Brice recognised it at once—himself and Magdalen. How could he alter this state of things? He cast his eyes quickly over the guests and soon discovered Griselda, but Lord Colefoot was by her side, and he was devoting himself to her, so that no empty space remained for Brice.

Made bold by his late decision and his dread of defeat, Brice walked quickly to the table where sat his Griselda. Her quick, joyous glances soon found him out, and indicated by a side look her disgust at having no place for him. Lord Colefoot was delighted to see another moth fluttering round his new wax candle. He put a rimless eyeglass into one eye and looked at Brice as if he were a strange curio.

'Aw—yes—hum; the fellow who acted just now,' he remarked to Griselda.

'A great friend of mine,' she answered, with a little smile hovering round her lips. 'We used to have such rides together in New Zealand.' Then, as Brice had come near enough to speak to her, she turned towards him and introduced him to the young lord. This New Zealand child was so free from self-consciousness that she was not even shy.

'Mr. Leslie, Lord Colefoot,' and she added, 'We were talking of you, of course. How well you acted! It was splendid, quite first-rate.'

'Some of you were professionals, I suppose?' said the young lord.

'Yes, some of us,' said Brice, smiling. 'So the

rest of us were put on our mettle. There is no seat here, I see. Lady Mary has been generous with her chairs. No one is allowed to stand.'

'Where is Miss Cuthbert?' said Griselda. 'She was really splendid.'

Brice turned round as if to look for her, but deceit was so foreign to his nature that he made no remark. Magdalen had not come back, so he resolved to eat his supper in haste before she did so.

'The labourer is worthy of his supper; I shall see you again,' he said, with a smile, addressing Griselda, and then he walked away. How young and fresh and happy she looked—his Griselda! she seemed now more like his daughter; yes, that was how it was. Had he been foolish to win her affection? He was too old for her, certainly he was very old in comparison, her simplicity was intensely fascinating in theory, but— He sat down in the place assigned to him, and felt as if a ghost were by his side—not Magdalen, but that other woman, the horror of his young manhood, the ruin of Percy Chester's life, his friend's evil genius, his curse. Fool that he was! how could

he, Percy, have left a diamond for worthless glass? 'Fool! and—well, so are we all,' he thought.

He poured out a glass of champagne and drank it down, then he ate a few mouthfuls and felt partly revived; he was strong, and had yet some resisting power. He had been frightfully imprudent, he had been taken unawares; but he was a man, not a weak fool, he would get over this mad infatuation; but Miss Cuthbert—Magdalen; did she—?

Brice rose quickly; a few others had done the same, and were strolling again into the gardens. It was getting late, some of the carriages had been announced, as Brice saw to his satisfaction, for now the evening would soon be over. As he passed out he heard various exclamations about Miss Cuthbert; where was she? Ah, there she was! just coming in. A murmur of applause, greetings, questionings followed. Brice placed himself in a recess where he could observe Magdalen without being seen. She was resplendent in some dark crimson attire; Brice saw only the general effect, but he noted a necklace of small diamonds round her throat, he noted the splendid

pose of her head and the waving hair that appeared to have arranged itself into that *beau désordre* which represents the highest art. Her lips were beautiful in colour, her smiles—she seemed lavish of them as the men pressed round her to congratulate her. Then she walked slowly down the tent, she must pass close by him. How he hated the men who crowded about her, how he hated the smiles she gave them so willingly, smiles that seemed so cheap to her. Such a woman fed on admiration ; she was not worth a life's devotion. He was—just then she came within hearing, and the words he heard were—

'Oh, without Mr. Leslie's acting I could not have done it! You must praise him. By the way, where is he?'

Brice experienced a revulsion of feeling. She was after all thinking of him, asking for him; if she gave away her smiles to others, she gave him her thoughts; she— He almost stepped forward and proclaimed himself, he almost walked up to her and before them all took his place at her side, almost,—but then, with a strong effort, he turned his back upon the animated group and walked slowly out into the cool night air.

He did not know which path he took. He was not conscious of the stray couples he met; he only knew that he was flying from himself and from her. All at once some one touched his arm.

'O Brice, there you are; I have been looking for you everywhere.' It was Griselda. 'That stupid Lord Colefoot would stick to me, and he is so foolish.' Griselda laughed happily. 'At last I had to say that I was going to look for Miss Cuthbert to help her, but she is surrounded with people. Now, let's have a little walk. It is jolly getting you to myself. Come this way, Brice, and tell me everything. Oh, I have so much to tell you. This fortnight has seemed very long without you. Papa laughs at me for being so studious, and mamma says—' Here Griselda paused and laughed again, 'There, never mind what she says; tell me everything.' He placed her hand on his arm and looked at her with his wonderful smile of protecting love. She was accustomed in the old days to his silent ways.

'My little girl has been enjoying herself?' he said gently.

'Yes, very much. If I could have been near you it would have been perfect. But I liked to hear people praising you, Brice. You acted your part so well, oh, so well! and Miss Cuthbert —wasn't she splendid? Fancy, Brice, this evening when I first came Lady Mary took me to her, and she gave me this rose. I have pinned it in again so carefully, for fear I should lose it. I think she is quite, quite fascinating,—don't you?'

'To a good many persons, evidently.'

'Yes, I am amongst the number. Isn't she handsome, and so—so—I don't know how to express it, but she looks very, very sad sometimes. Not before people, but when she is alone. This evening, for instance, when we were doing the flowers, she made me feel inclined to cry. Do you know, Brice, she seems to me to belong to an old-world civilisation; I feel so young, so modern, near her. In New Zealand we could never have found any one like her. I think new lands are not haunted as old worlds seem to be. I believe that all the disappointed people, when they die, become ghosts and wander about and tease people, so that old countries are more

full of unquiet spirits than our new homes on the other side of the world.'

'I think so too,' he answered; then, after a pause, he asked, 'Have you seen the illuminated fountain?' He had looked round and noted that there was a stream of people coming out from the supper-tent, and he did not wish to meet Magdalen at the moment.

'No; take me there. Brice, when are you coming home?'

'To-morrow most likely. If Lady Mary will let me go, it will certainly be to-morrow, but I must just help Mr. Milton to clear all this artificialism away.'

'It has been perfect! I think Lady Mary is a born genius. She is so very agreeable—a lady of society in the nicest sense of the word.'

'Yes, and in its most pleasant interpretation, and she hates dulness. There are few like her.'

'How countrified and ordinary it makes one feel to know such people; at least, it gives me that feeling; but you, Brice, you seem to fit in wherever you go. I felt so proud of you during the acting, and I wished to tell every one that you cared for me, a stupid little thing like me.'

'On the contrary, Griselda, if you had said so, the people here would have answered that I was an awfully lucky fellow. You have been very much admired. I began to think that I ought not to bind you down to a life of commonplace, or perhaps a bush life, when here you might be—'

'What nonsense! You and I are made for country life. I'm sure I should get sick of parties and compliments, and you would laugh at the poor people and make no end of enemies. Brice, can't you fancy how these people would despise our old motto, *A Dieu Foy, aux amis Foyer.* I love parties like this, and I shall love dancing, but I shall never regret any of them—never, when—'

'When what, dear?' said Brice very quickly.

Griselda looked round; there was no one near them, they were alone. The beauty of the scene made her realise something of life's strange mystery, for the play had saddened her a little. Not given to romance, the girl suddenly felt a touch of the strange longing for that love which takes one out of oneself into an ideal existence. She clasped both her hands round his arm and laid her fair head on his shoulder.

'When I am your wife, Brice.'

The fountain splashed its illuminated drops close by them, as if a rainbow had dissolved into flowing water. Above, the trees shivered slightly, as the tiniest breath of wind came to whisper its good-night among their branches. Life to Griselda was like this rainbow hue, all variety and all beauty, and Brice was the centre of the iridescent arc.

But Griselda was too young to be cautious, too young to be suspicious, and her casual glance had decided that the place was deserted. In another moment Magdalen Cuthbert rose from a hidden seat close at hand. She did it so naturally that there was no time for embarrassment or for flight; indeed, Griselda's fair curling hair still touched Brice's shoulder as Miss Cuthbert spoke.

'We both thought this place deserted,' she said, and laughed — yes, laughed her little hard laugh that Brice knew so well, the one in which there was no joy and no hope. Griselda ought to have been covered with confusion, but she was herself at once as she momentarily stood away from Brice.

'O Miss Cuthbert! I am glad it was only you, because, do you see, it is all a secret.'

'Evidently,' said Magdalen, and laughed again, 'but I warn you others may come.'

'You had better go home, Griselda,' said Brice, forcing himself to speak naturally. 'It is late, come and look for Mrs. Hope; I must do my duty with the other guests.'

He walked quickly forward, and Griselda followed him, nodding her 'good-night' to Miss Cuthbert, and adding to Brice, 'Oh, dear Brice, don't be annoyed; Miss Cuthbert looks so true, she will say nothing, and I am sure she will understand.'

Then Magdalen Cuthbert was left alone. She walked a step back, and sat down again on the seat where she had been so well concealed. Why had she come here? She had, with difficulty, managed to get away from the admiring crowd, because she wanted to see Brice; she fancied he had not been in the supper-tent. Were his feelings hurt? was he mistaking her? Could he not understand that, at last — after all these years, he, this quiet, sympathetic Brice, this friend in a thousand, had touched her poor, cold heart; that he alone, of all the men she had known and who had flattered her, had been capable of restoring

animation to a dead thing; that he had made her believe that life was still worth living, and that love was still possible, that *she* still could love? The discovery had been so marvellous, so strange, that she had let herself only very reluctantly believe it, but the very reluctance had been sweet. Yes, she knew it now, her life still contained something worth living for. She had so much to give, and for so long it had been locked away, hidden, frozen, or withered. No, it had only been frozen. Brice had allowed the warm sun to penetrate, and the frozen depth had been moved, and then slowly expanded into love. And now—

After all, he was the lover of another—worse, he was engaged; how foolish of her not to guess it sooner, not to know that all men are liars, and that all men are willing to deceive. That girl, that simple-minded child, *she* had won his heart—she, a mere butterfly, a fluttering, clinging creature who could love any one, who might marry any one because of her beauty, a mere milk-maid beauty—she had taken him from her. No, that could hardly be the case; the time was not long enough, it was— Magdalen paused in her train of thought,

and slowly rose and stood by the illuminated fountain. Though there was no one to admire her, she seemed to be posing before herself; she felt that she was a grand, a beautiful woman, a woman who could fascinate when she chose and whom she chose, that any other woman, opposed to her, had very little chance of victory, that is, if she chose— Here Magdalen laughed softly and bitterly; this child, this fair-haired New Zealander, was no obstacle in her way. Was it not plain already that, without meaning it, without knowing it, she had supplanted her, and if she chose—? Magdalen wrapped a transparent gauze-like scarf around her, and it seemed to add a new softness and beauty to her face; then with a slow, deliberate step, she walked back to the lawn, where, already, the number of guests was much thinned, and where Lady Mary and her husband were receiving the last gracious and hearty thanks of their friends.

'Magdalen, where have you been hiding?' said Lady Mary, 'the Duke has gone, and was so sorry not to wish you good-bye.'

'I was walking in fairyland,' said Magdalen, smiling, then she plunged into conversation with

the various groups of guests, and every one remarked how brilliant and clever Miss Cuthbert was, and how extremely handsome. The Duke had been heard to admire her, and the Duke—as, of course, all dukes must be—was a connoisseur in female beauty.

Then, at last, all the guests were gone, the servants ran hither and thither; Frank and Brice Leslie went about examining dangerous or expiring lights; the illuminations depending on electricity were suddenly extinguished, the darkness reasserted itself, only the stars shone out in the still, hot night.

Lady Mary linked her arm into Magdalen's.

'It is over,' she said, 'really I am almost sorry, and I am so much elated with the compliments I have received.'

'It is well over,' answered Magdalen, 'for you have succeeded; I think success cures all regrets.' Lady Mary was struck by something in Magdalen's voice.

'Success is so common with you, dear, why don't you ever follow it up? I know some one who has been in—I won't say heaven, because of one's

uncertain knowledge of that region, but in Arcadia this evening.' Magdalen smiled.

'You mean Mr. Leslie,' she said quite calmly. Lady Mary laughed.

'I name no names. But come, Magdalen, you must be weary, the gentlemen won't be in for some time; let us go to bed. I owe you too much to wish to ruin your beauty.'

Magdalen was delighted to disappear before the men came back.

When she was left alone she did not lose her smiles; on the contrary, she went to the great pier glass and looked at herself with intense pleasure and satisfaction. It was not merely vanity that filled her soul, but a genuine admiration for her own beauty. Her eyes sparkled like living diamonds, her cheeks were exquisite in colour. 'I do choose,' she said at last, 'the obstacle is so insignificant, just big enough to give one enough incentive. He was Percy's friend, and I love him; that child does not matter; I even forgive him, for—he had not seen me then.'

CHAPTER XV

THE next morning three persons at Rosehill woke up with unusual thoughts and feelings. Lady Mary, with a sigh of relief and a smile of satisfied triumph: she had succeeded. She knew she had led a fashion, that others would follow, or try to follow, her example, and that for a time at least society through her means would be less dull. She would not have changed places with any one in the world this morning. On the other hand, she was just a little uneasy about her other triumph: why had Magdalen looked so supremely calm at the mention of Brice Leslie? was she going to disappoint her after all? It would be quite a shabby trick, considering Lady Mary had set her heart on marrying Magdalen—for love too, not for money!

It was certainly time to apply a little gentle

pressure, or to find out where the hitch was. Brice Leslie would soon be gone, but he must not depart without being engaged to Magdalen. Lady Mary was prepared to send the paragraph to the society papers: 'We understand that a marriage has been arranged between Miss Cuthbert, so well known in London society, and Mr. Brice Leslie of ——' (some queer name in New Zealand), 'for,' she added to herself, 'an unpronounceable place lends enchantment to an unknown name; people are afraid to own their ignorance of geography, and they fancy that perhaps the locality may be very famous or perhaps the seat of a millionaire.'

Brice himself was fighting a fierce strife between passion and honour. He had no intention of giving way; he hated himself for having fallen so low. He recognised that, even if a man is not master of his heart he is master of his actions, and to find out *now* that Griselda Foy was too simple-minded, too much of the pure-angel type of womanhood to inspire a man's most passionate feelings, was certainly a base action,—an action sober morality denounces and society calls an ugly name,—that society which countenances unpro-

claimed evil but will not condone such conduct in an honourable man.

Brice was engaged to Griselda, and he would marry her. He loved her with the deep quiet love that had grown up with him from her childhood; he loved her because one loves what is beautiful; he loved her because evil and Griselda were lines that had no meeting point.

Magdalen Cuthbert had not really satisfied the deepest longings of his complete nature, but she had at the same time attracted and repelled all his emotions. She had given the lie to his best feelings, and she had also called forth his passion and his noblest love and pity. She attracted and repelled him, and these sentiments followed each other in such quick succession that they appeared to be simultaneous.

After last night's revelation, what would she say to him or think of him? Well, it was best so. She would scorn and despise him, without knowing that he had never meant to be overmastered; that he had begun by despising, and then that he had been cut by the edge he fancied too blunt to wound him. If the dream were not over for him it must

be for her: she would reject even his friendship. Better to go away at once without seeing her, to find some excuse for flight, than to stay and be scorned; but, on the other hand, that would attract attention, and she would perhaps suffer unjustly for him. Therefore Brice Leslie was ready to endure martyrdom.

And the last of the trio, Magdalen, that morning looked into her glass and saw that her lips were set in the old fashion, saw, for she had learnt to study herself, that the look of indifference was assumed, and she knew that her last state was worse than her first. Only for one moment she softened; she sat down by the open window and her strange blue eyes filled with tears, as she said, brushing them bravely away, 'He had better have left me with my dead love, it was sweeter than this new birth.'

Then, ashamed of her own weakness, she clasped a bracelet on her wrist and snapped it fiercely.—'It is my turn now,' she said, 'my turn; he must take care of himself.'

And so the three went down and met as ordinary mortals, or rather Lady Mary was delightful,

bright, and cheerful, as if she had not undergone unheard-of efforts and fatigue; Magdalen brilliant and caustic in her remarks, Brice Leslie silent, and Frank Milton intensely matter-of-fact about results and damages.

'I suppose it is the husband that pays the piper, eh, Lady Mary?' said the artist, laughing. 'What will this little fancy cost?'

'What a vulgar and sordid idea!' said his wife. 'Some people spend thousands to give their friends pain, we, a few hundreds to give them intense pleasure. The pleasure-givers of the world are its kings and queens. Now, Frank, how can you complain about the cost of a joint crown?'

'A case of William and Mary,' said Magdalen, 'one takes and one pretends to give.' Then she turned towards Brice, 'If Lady Mary takes a crown, perhaps she will bestow something on us the poor strolling players.'

'Ah, you clever people are uncrowned kings and queens! Look at Frank, his portraits bring him more fame and money than all my talents can effect or procure.'

'Your talents bring you more debts than I can pay,' said Frank, smiling.

'Fie, for shame, Frank; if we were not a contrast how we should quarrel! I believe in contrasts.' She gave a side glance towards Magdalen.

'So do I,' said Miss Cuthbert, 'but your excitement has made us dull to-day; suggest something to raise our spirits.'

'What a happy thought! After a fitful fever let us have rest; I vote for a barge expedition down the canal. To have no trouble but to be wafted past beautiful things is in itself an excitement.'

'I am expected home,' said Brice quietly; he had not looked at Magdalen, though he was of course intensely conscious of her presence.

'What, to-day?' she said, turning towards him; 'they give you a short time to get over the fatigues; besides, talking events over is better than the thing itself. In duty to all of us, Mr. Leslie, you ought to stay another day.'

'If I am commanded—'

'Of course you are,' put in Lady Mary. (What can these two be up to? she thought, feeling a

little puzzled.) 'Can you disobey a Queen's commands?'

'Besides,' added Frank, 'you wanted to study this new electric battery. The engineer comes again to-day, and you must see him.'

'Then the barge, Frank, can you send some one about it? I feel that it is the only cure I can have for the anxiety I have gone through.'

'Very well, but why can't the female mind cease fluttering?'

'That recalls the dove.'

'And the dove the serpent. By the way, Leslie, are serpents really wise? if so, wisdom always seems a little at a discount. I expect you to be a naturalist.'

'We didn't deal in serpents in New Zealand, we left them for the Zoo here.' Brice said anything that came into his head. He was thinking, 'She wishes me to stay one day more; I may as well. Griselda will easily understand that I can't get away at once. By Jove, what a trustful darling she was, never even so much as guessed anything yesterday.'

'You will despise a canal barge,' said Magdalen,

looking at him; 'but it has its peculiar charm, it gives you time to make up your mind about difficult subjects.'

'Hang her, she is making fun of me,' thought Brice; 'after all, she wasn't in earnest, I believe. She is fooling all the time. Yes, I'll stay to prove to her that I'm not fooled.' Aloud, Brice added—

'I've tried every means of progression. There is some pleasure in all of them.'

'They've quarrelled,' thought Lady Mary. 'This won't do. Yes, the barge is really the best idea. No exertion and nothing to ruffle the Magdalen's temper. At times she is not altogether honey or molasses. Has he proposed, or has he not?'

Magdalen spoke next.

'You'll want a supply of newspapers, Lady Mary, to read what society says about you.'

'It's of no consequence what they say, so that they mention me. By the way, I always wonder which of one's guests is the newspaper correspondent in disguise,—don't you, Mr. Leslie?'

'A lady, I conclude, they so easily conceal their true occupations.'

'You are getting on, I declare. In another

month you will—no, I will leave my prophecy well concealed. Come, Magdalen, come and help me to reckon up my liabilities; Frank likes early settling. By the way, Frank, let us take the Duke at his word and land at the Hall, so that Mr. Leslie may see his show-place. The picture of the Duchess in the drawing-room is one of Frank's best—it is nearly as plain as her Grace herself.'

'I hate show-places,' said Magdalen quickly. 'Do you remember Thackeray's account of the housekeeper's description?—"The side entrance and 'all. The halligator hover the mantelpiece was brought home by Hadmiral St. Michael when a Capting with Lord Hanson. The harms on the cheers is the harms of the Carabas Family."'

'Magdalen is a born republican. She would suit the New World, Mr. Leslie.' Then the two ladies walked away with smiling faces.

'I'll go down the village and wire home,' said Brice, rising, 'the ladies seem to wish to undertake this barge affair.'

'Oh, you have only to please yourself, you know, Leslie,' said the artist; 'I'm going back to the paint-pots. One can't tell what one's womenfolk

will be up to next. One has to go straight on, or else one's sure to fall into snares.'

'Sure to,' said Brice, laughing, but his was a forced laugh; then he sat down, wrote his telegrams, and went out.

But he went out in a strange frame of mind. He wished at one moment that he could go home immediately and never see Magdalen again, and then the next instant he was feeling intense pleasure at the thought of being in her presence for a few hours more, watching the turn of her head, hearing her speak. She should not find it out, and now she knew—

But the strange thing was, Magdalen seemed to act as if she had not met Brice and Griselda together, as if she had altogether misunderstood the scene, as if Griselda had said nothing, and this strange ignorance puzzled Brice dreadfully. He did not know whether he were glad or sorry. It made him madly uncertain of everything, of himself, of Magdalen, even of Griselda; but outwardly he was calm and grave, only just a little calmer and graver than usual, and Lady Mary felt like a hound that has lost the scent, and sniffs

about hither and thither to find it again. What could it all mean? Those two must be lovers, and if the party had not sufficed—why, that barge excursion must put the finishing touch. She would land at Oldham Castle and sketch, they should have no excuse (these contrary lovers), because of course they were lovers; it was no use denying such a thing.

If Lady Mary had known the truth!

The barge as chartered by Lady Mary Milton was a thing of beauty. It was not to be expected that she would allow such a suitable and effective thing as a canal barge to go unadorned by her genius. She wished it to be a Watteau-like creation, one which would serve for the 'Embarkation for the Island of Cythera'; she meant it to be worthy of Magdalen's engagement. She had a charming way of settling wished-for events; this lady certainly ought to have had a wider sphere; but, at all events, unlike many of us, she made the best of the one accorded to her. The draping of the seats was charming, the Eastern rugs were of softest harmonies; there were light garlands of wild flowers

twined in and out, and there was extreme comfort. There are some artists who are artists of the material, though they cannot draw a stroke. In their hands flowers and stuff both seem to fall into exquisite forms and poses and folds; it is a gift that is born with them, and, unlike draughtmanship, cannot be improved.

Frank Milton utterly refused to join this expedition; he wanted to rest in his own way, but so far relented that he promised to ride over to the ruined castle of Oldham in the evening and to escort them back. He had his doubts about 'Mary's mania,' but he was a wise man and was not going to interfere. Leslie was soon departing, and then Miss Cuthbert's fascination must end.

It was to be a day of surprises, however, for several persons.

Lady Mary ordered some dainty cakes and tea to be put up in a basket; she meant to make this beverage at the ruins, and they should get back in the cool of the evening. If a proposal is ever to be made, no time is so opportune as towards sunset. She remembered that Frank had selected the evening hour for his declaration;

she was fond of repeating this as a fact, though he had often told her the hour of his declaration had been really pure chance.

The beauty of this waterway baffled description to-day, and when the three reached the canal bank they could not refrain from expressing their delight at the glowing richness of the colouring. Brice's silence was hardly noticeable, for the ladies kept up a lively conversation. Magdalen showed no consciousness of his silence, broken as it was now and then by fits of talkativeness. She was acting as if she were a queen and he a mere subject hardly worthy of notice.

'Only one day more,' thought Brice, 'and then—but, hang it all! why doesn't she show what she means and what she thinks of me? Have I fallen too low in her estimation to make even that explanation worth while?'

The barge was to be drawn by a led horse; a man was at the helm to steer, and there was nothing for the three to do but enjoy themselves.

Suddenly Lady Mary remembered an omission; she had brought no sugar. The castle was a lonely spot where nothing could be purchased,

so it was absolutely necessary that they should take all requisites.

It was some ten minutes from a small village shop, and Brice immediately started off to rectify the omission, while Lady Mary and Magdalen settled themselves among the cushions.

'We shall have a lovely expedition, my Magdalen,' said the charming hostess, opening her sunshade, 'and then I shall lose my guests. All good things end very soon in this world, and my cousin is one of the good things of life. Come, acknowledge that you think so.' Lady Mary did not expect an acknowledgment, she fancied she knew Magdalen too well, but she asked it all the same.

'Yes,' said Magdalen, clasping her hands above her head, from which her large hat had fallen off, causing a diamond ring on her finger to flash forth light among her dark wavy hair. 'Yes, he is a man one could like.'

Lady Mary was inwardly delighted, but she turned away, however, to leave Magdalen more free to speak her mind.

'A man one could love,' she said very softly.

'Yes, a man one could love,' repeated Magdalen quietly; and Lady Mary's heart beat faster.

'Magdalen, my dear friend, if you think so—why, I know that he—'

'That he loves me! Yes, so do I—'

'And you return it? Then, O, Magdalen! you can't tell how much I have wished for that—*that* to happen to you. I do believe in love and marriage; see how happy we are, Frank and I; a woman is made to be worshipped, petted, and spoilt through life—for that end she was created, I believe. Of course, sometimes things go wrong, but'—Lady Mary waxed bold—'the past is wiped away when the future looks golden. You, Magdalen, have felt some things too strongly; it is your nature, but even the saddest experiences can be forgotten.'

Magdalen smiled, and all her nature seemed to soften and unbend for a few moments as she leant towards her friend.

'You are a true friend, a noble woman,' she said, and such words from Miss Cuthbert meant a good deal. 'Will you never change, never disbelieve in me as so many do?'

'Never, Magdalen. There, you see I am not jealous even of Brice Leslie.'

'Brice Leslie!' Magdalen's tone was strange and past understanding.

'Magdalen, don't let any — any pride come between you and a true man's love, I beseech you. There are yet many years of happiness before you; you will give him what he requires; and he —I have watched him narrowly—he has a strong nature, capable of any amount of disinterested affection for a woman he loves. In that he is something like Frank.'

There was a pause, Magdalen stooped over the side of the barge and let the water gurgle against her diamond-encircled fingers.

'What do you want me to do?' she said very softly.

'To—to—say "yes" if, or when, he asks you to be his wife.'

Magdalen lifted her head suddenly, her eyes flashed forth a lightning glance, her face flushed and her red lips quivered. Never had Lady Mary seen her so much moved.

'You don't know what you are asking,' she said,

'but if you care to hear it, to know it, I will promise you—if Brice Leslie asks me to be his wife I will say "yes."'

Lady Mary was uneasy. This sounded unnatural.

'But you mean you will discourage him. That will not be fair.'

'On the contrary, I shall encourage him—to—to—'

'To hear his fate?' said Lady Mary, laughing nervously.

'He is coming,' said Magdalen, pointing to Brice, who was walking quickly down the bank, and who had been hidden by the ruins. 'Perhaps I had better say "no" to all you have asked me?' Magdalen was really agitated. A struggle was going on in her mind.

'No, no, Magdalen, you have promised, you cannot draw back; believe me, I—— You have been very quick, Mr. Leslie. Now, come in and I will give the word of command to depart. The flies have been teasing that poor cart-horse almost to desperation.'

Brice stepped into the barge and found that the

place left for him was close to Magdalen. In another moment they were gliding down with that peculiar motion, which one can only experience by this mode of progression. Brice spoke first.

'This is charming, and really for beauty it will bear comparison with—'

'Your own canal boats, I suppose,' said Magdalen.

'Yes; but here it is more wooded, more luxuriant, more fascinating.'

'Less commonplace, in fact; but for ordinary life the commonplace is the safest; we soon tire of the eccentric. Now, Lady Mary, this is the time for a song. Shall it be a duet or a trio?'

All Magdalen's gaiety had returned; her smile seemed to give out happiness; her eyes laughed with her lips. Brice felt that his courage was going; why had he not run away? He had fancied himself so brave, so bound by custom, so tied by every obligation of right, that he believed he would be hedged in by it; and that now she knew the truth— But it seemed she knew and did not care; she could be as merry as before, evidently he was nothing to her. It was better so, infinitely better; but he felt the struggle was

still fierce, he was weakened by that very unconscious manner of hers.

Brice crossed his arms and listened to the two voices as they sang a little boat-song, set to a strange weird melody, by a friend of Lady Mary, an amateur genius; Magdalen's contralto, though not powerful, was in perfect tune.

The barge meanwhile glided along to the music of the softest gurgle of the keel. Now and then a frightened moor-hen splashed suddenly into the reeds as the boat cut through a sheet of water-lily leaves, or separated the graceful arrow-heads; or else brushed against the tall bulrushes, making the stragglers bend forward as if forcing them to greet the fair company.

Brice gradually turned his eyes towards Miss Cuthbert's bright countenance; it was as if she were a sun, and he but a poor new world, bound to be powerfully attracted, though also influenced by an opposing force, and bound to try and fly into space. Was she acting thus on purpose? was she so cruel as to defy him? No, he would not be a mean coward; he would resist this influence, however powerful it might be.

'Look, do you see, Mr. Leslie, there is a perfect picture: the bridge so exquisitely reflected in the water, and that solitary cow coming to drink at the shallow part, with its child-conductor. It is a pet cow evidently. You see that sort of thing abroad but not here often. Surely New Zealand can give you nothing more beautiful?'

'Nothing!' said Brice, he was thinking of Magdalen herself.

'But, anyhow, the humanity of the New World is better than ours. Last night there was a fair sprinkling of our richest aristocratic young men, and they had all a very scented kid-glove appearance.'

'Nature suits its life to the surroundings,' said Brice earnestly; 'these young men, I suppose, are framed to combat a scented kid-glove life, whilst we in our New World are easily overcome by what seems to them perfectly natural to everyday life.'

'The sledge-hammer has to be regulated by delicate machinery, you mean?' said Lady Mary, smiling; 'but if you give us the sledge-hammer, we will provide the rest.'

'You will take out a patent for it,' said Magdalen.

'I fear the iron would be destroyed before the

machinery could be adjusted; the finest metal is the most brittle.'

'It does not impair its value. Ah, there are the ruins in sight. Now for a gipsy fire and tea at a picnic; one feels a child again.'

'It is too early yet; but if you two will guard the provisions, I will choose a spot and give orders about the horse and its driver. The two men will most likely have hop-tea.'

Lady Mary was cunning to-day — quite barefacedly indeed. At another time Magdalen would have laughed at her, to-day she had no heart to laugh; her heart was too heavy for laughter, too proud for tears.

The two who were thus left alone did not even pretend that it was natural, or that they were as usual. A silence fell on both. Magdalen lay slightly back on the cushions and watched the waving willow-leaves, which, dipping into the water, were continually being taken down stream for a little way, and yet never could reach further. That was like her life, she thought, always carried forward, but never advancing; striving vainly after an unknown, unknowable bourne; attached by force

of habit to a well-recognised standard of life, but loving an impossible ideal. Impossible? To whom could she turn? she whom the world considered so strong, and who was yet so weak; who— What was she doing? She was softening, and this was certainly not the time to be weak. She clasped her hands firmly together, and slowly turned her eyes to Brice. All the coldness she could express in her eyes was there.

'You will go to-morrow, Mr. Leslie, having learnt the lesson Lady Mary wished you to learn —the ways of the rich, clever, aristocratic world. Outside that circle comes chaos, a bubbling confusion, material not yet fused into any known shape, a thing of naught.'

'Why should you be ironical, Miss Cuthbert?' he said, in his old impatient tone, that tone which had first attracted Magdalen's attention.

'Why? for convenience' sake, I suppose.'

Another pause, and this time the pause was dangerous, for the smile that hovered about those lips was maddening to Brice. Love and something like hatred fought together in him, and he exclaimed—

'What's the use of fooling like this? You know it all—all that miserable story! Why did I ever see you?' His face was intensely in earnest now, and therefore intensely attractive to Magdalen.

'Yes, I know it all—since last night—and who is to blame, am I?' The tone was one of withering scorn.

'You offered me friendship,' said Brice, much in the same tone as his earliest prototype, 'and I accepted it: how could I tell that—but *you* knew your power well enough.'

'Yes, but I did not know yours,' said Magdalen, almost under her breath.

Another pause followed, but Magdalen's lips quivered; this time there was more pleasure than pain expressed on them. She had stretched out her ungloved fingers and was grasping the edge of the barge, the blue veins made a delicate tracery down the white hand and the under-part of the wrist. Brice held out his hand and tried to place it on hers.

'Don't touch me,' she said quickly and angrily, 'you have no right to do so.'

'I have,' he said, in a low, passionate voice.

'Good God, Magdalen, the right which worship gives to a man.'

'A man who is engaged to some one else.'

Magdalen laughed scornfully.

'Yes.' He was bold now; he dared to look the fact in the face.

'Do you know?' she said, hiding her face by turning it away, so that Brice could only see the exquisite line of neck and ear, 'that you are reacting Percy's—life?'

'No, that was criminal; mine has only been a terrible mistake.'

'A mistake you are bound to accept.'

'Bound—bound to act a lie—no, for the sake of—'

'Hush,' said Magdalen. 'How can I believe you?'

'I don't know. Tell me how to prove my words?'

Magdalen turned towards him, lifted her hand slowly and pushed back her hat as she slowly passed her hand over the restless waves of her hair.

'Deny that you intended to be silent to-day.'

'I can't—I came here meaning to keep true to——an ideal, Magdalen—the reality has been too strong for me. Won't that satisfy you?'

There came the old, short, dry laugh.

'I knew it,' was the answer.

'And you have been trying to be cruel?'

'No, it is natural to me.'

'Then you are incapable of feeling—of—love?' he said impatiently, 'and yet you are—a woman, a beautiful woman.'

'I learnt it long ago—from a man.'

'Percy—Good God! Let me tell you what—' But Magdalen shook her head.

'No, I don't want to know. I have buried him—at last—'

'As you will bury the remembrance of this talk, whilst I—'

'You know nothing of what time can do, will do—nothing.'

'Nothing! Listen, Magdalen. It is you who know nothing, nothing of a man's love—it is an awful thing; it makes him weak as a child; it eats his life away; it crushes out his existence; it makes the day hateful and the night—— Magdalen, what-

ever you do, don't laugh; if you do I shall feel as if I should have only strength to kill you.'

Magdalen slowly clasped her hands, and for once did not disobey.

'One can see you have not suffered long—or often,' she said scornfully. She was not in the least frightened by his vehemence. She liked it. To see Brice Leslie, usually so quiet, so self-contained, like this was balm to her mind. If she loved,—and this fact she hardly dared own or contemplate at this moment,—she still wished to keep a clear brain and not allow herself to be guided by passion; it was such a new experience, she wished to reserve it, to hide it from every one, almost from herself.

'Time has nothing to do with such things,' he said, still impatiently. Then breaking off, as if argument was puerile, he seized Magdalen's hand—

'You are so clever, you understand partly, only partly; tell me what you command, and—I can do that, I can obey. With you it is a matter for argument, a psychological study. I don't understand such things. My life out there was so simple, so straightforward; here I seem to be entangled

in a net—oh! but there must be simple ways of disentangling oneself.'

'Very simple; Percy took one of them,' said Magdalen scornfully. 'He was your friend.'

Brice lifted his head proudly; even for Magdalen he would not deny his friend,—and she loved him for this constancy, at the same moment as she scorned him in words.

'Yes, he was my friend,' said Brice slowly. 'He made you suffer, but—'

Magdalen moved her hand impatiently.

'Leave him out of this question.'

'Magdalen, I can, I will, devote my life to—'

'To make up for his mistake.' She laughed. 'I am not a girl of twenty.'

Brice Leslie was deeply hurt. With his arms crossed he looked away down into the depth of the clear water, he bit his lip to prevent himself from saying something bitter to the woman who was so intensely cruel—was it consciously or unconsciously?

Unperceived by him Magdalen was watching him; she knew she had wrung his heart; she knew that, whether consciously or unconsciously she hardly knew herself,—she had drawn him on, forced

him to love her. She had done it in other cases, and had not repented; but, before, it had not been with men like Brice Leslie. She looked round sadly; the great weariness of life fell upon her, almost overcame her, that weariness that finds comfort in the idea of Nîrvana, in the belief that life itself is a dream of a dream. Was this conflict worth while—she thought to herself, was anything worth while? Suddenly, bending over the edge as if to seek for what attracted Brice, she saw her own reflection, it quivered in the quivering element, and it was beautiful. After all beauty was tangible, real, capable of being enjoyed and capable of giving enjoyment. What did the rest matter? the gospel of right and wrong might be a myth, but beauty was intensely real.

'Brice,' she whispered, holding out her hand, 'Brice, forgive me.'—(This was the first time Magdalen Cuthbert had ever petitioned any one to forgive her.)—'But, listen, that is Lady Mary's voice, she is in pain—come!'

CHAPTER XVI

THERE has been a great deal written about the dual action of the brain, about conscious and unconscious hypnotism, about the power of persons, under special circumstances, to transmute nervous diseases. Doubtless, this is an age of wonderful psychological discoveries, discoveries which will in the near future open out an entirely new field of thought. Men's ideas about weakness and will and crime will be modified and revolutionised, and the ancient prejudices which once made our forefathers settle matters of right and wrong in a delightfully offhand manner, that saved them an infinity of trouble, will disappear. The time may indeed come when the still more ancient ideas of fairies and demons may be found to be true, and further, we shall then discover that what in men and women was called inconsistent action, is in

truth the work of other separate influences which make up their whole nature, and that it is the supremacy of one of these influences which forms the apparent character — subject, nevertheless, to the chance of a sudden uprising of one of the weaker or partially-subdued elements. In his own person, man is in truth a battle-field where many are fighting for supremacy. The mystery which envelops us is on the whole still a mystery, though now and then we get glimpses of unrealised possibilities and of vast uncertainties.

Some evil genii were mixing themselves up very much in Lady Mary's affairs this afternoon, or so she thought. In the first place, as she was walking back softly towards the barge, wishing to see how things were progressing, she unfortunately fell over a hidden root, and the cry of pain forced from her at once brought Magdalen and Brice to her help. That was bad enough, for they had to help her up and stay with her till she was fairly out of pain; but then, who should appear but Frank and Frank's brother, who had just made his appearance at Rosehill, taking them by surprise, from the steppes of Russia. After that there was nothing

more to hope for, and the little lady only trusted that the short interval of solitude which the lovers had enjoyed had sufficed for them to come to an understanding.

She would have given a good deal to know for certain; but, in the meanwhile, the picnic proceeded happily, the gentlemen entered into the spirit of the thing, whilst the two ladies sat down on soft Eastern rugs and were assiduously waited upon. Lady Mary had not a moment alone with Magdalen, but she noticed that she was quiet, almost sad, and that half her merriment had flown. This, however, might be a good sign. Captain Milton was a very amusing man, who had travelled much and was a mine of good stories and anecdotes, so Magdalen's sadness was not observable. One sign, however, was very visible, and this was that Brice devoted himself to her, watched her least movement and answered stray questions from others in an absent manner.

Lady Mary was hopeful, for she knew Magdalen was not a woman to be won in a moment. She, therefore, fancied progress was satisfactory.

The evening, too, was pleasant and cheerful, and

when the men came back to the drawing-room there was much to tell the returned traveller, and much to hear from him. Magdalen and Brice could thus talk apart without being conspicuous, and from her corner Lady Mary noted all this with pleasure. Later on, unfortunately, the sky clouded over, the heat turned into a thunderstorm, and rain came down in sheets, amidst the congratulations of the party at its having kept off so long. It was just like Mary's luck, her husband said.

It is impossible to have much private conversation in a room with only five persons in it; but Brice watched his opportunity, and managed to say, under cover of Magdalen's music—

'Magdalen, I must go to-morrow.' He dared not say more, but he was forced to say this. That previous conversation had been very unsatisfactory, in spite of her last relenting speech.

Since that moment, perhaps something of the portentousness of the deed he was contemplating had come over Brice. He felt that he must be sure of Magdalen, certain of her feelings before he dared outrage the feelings of some of the best people he knew.

He hated society more than ever this evening. He would have liked all kinds of impossible things; he would even have preferred to run away from everything—almost from Magdalen and her enchantments, from the attraction of her every movement and the fascination of her smile.

She had apparently got over that soft influence by the time he had spoken the words, for quite heedless of him she went on playing the piano.

When she spoke it was with a smile on her lips.

'Well?'

'What do you command?' he said, hardly knowing or understanding what it was.

'You forget I am a woman,' she answered, under cover of her music, 'and you are a man. We were born to obey the lords of creation, I believe.'

Brice was angry at her pretended playfulness.

'What nonsense! Sooner or later this must end —I must come back.'

'What for?' She struck a chord and looked up, not at him but at the picture opposite, representing some inferior artist's idea of the blessed Damozel. That legend had never impressed Magdalen except as a poetical fancy; she pre-

ferred Leconte de Lisle's poems with their new Buddhist tendencies and oriental philosophy, or Shelley and Keats, and all their intense poetic charm of pure ideal poetry. The blessed Damozel waiting for her lover seemed too much like life itself to be associated with the thought of a hereafter, if, as Magdalen said sometimes with a look of sadness, there were one.

'For you, Magdalen,' he said, stooping, as if to turn the page of a music book, and by that means coming so near to her that he felt her warm breath upon his cheek, 'I must come back for you —when I am free.' She smiled a little ironically, so he continued—

'You do not believe it? I wish your unbelief were true, but I *shall* come back, and when I do—!' Magdalen lifted her hands from the keys and turned over the leaves of the music book. At the other end of the room the other three were loud in conversation.

Captain Milton was telling a ghost story, and the snatches of it reached the two at the piano. 'Well, the lady always would make her appearance upon settling-day, and stood by him as he received

the tenants' rents. It was enough to scare them out of their wits, the fellow told me. First-hand story, you know—'

'Not a bad excuse to find for refusing to pay rent,' said Frank. 'I declare those Irish knaves have a wonderfully keen sense of humour. Just imagine an English tenant—'

Magdalen felt her hand suddenly grasped by Brice.

'When I come back—a free man, promise me.'

'Hush, they will see you. Do you think I am one who can receive or give promises? Do you think I have learnt nothing from the past?'

'You have not learnt—'

'I say, Miss Cuthbert,' put in the Captain—he was not in the plot and knew nothing of Lady Mary's plans—'now you have done playing, come and tell us if you believe in ghosts.'

Magdalen rose and walked forward, much to Brice's intense disgust.

'Yes. Ghosts of one's own thoughts; those are stranger than any ordinary received idea of disembodied spirits.'

'Thoughts! Oh, they are natural and all that, but I should like to see a *bonâ fide* ghost. Heard of them, of course, but as to seeing them! Upon my word, though, I've met a fellow who said he had seen the Flying Dutchman. Don't believe a word of it, but—'

'Till you do, you suspend your judgment to the mast-head, Arthur?' said Lady Mary. 'But you should have been here last night, and then you might have beheld something better worth seeing than ghosts. To think what one may miss in twenty-four hours!—So you must really leave us to-morrow, Mr. Leslie? Is it positively necessary?'

'Yes, positively; but I have been here so long, I feel as if—'

'Spare your compliments between cousins. You will soon be back again, I know.'

'Yes, very soon, I hope,' said Brice stupidly; but Lady Mary forgave him, and when they separated for the night he grasped her hand warmly, but he was also conscious of the thought —'If she knew?'

Magdalen paused a little at the foot of the stairs. The gentlemen were going to play billiards,

but the ladies were weary and were retiring early to rest.

'Good-night,' she said, holding out her hand to Brice, and the smile she gave him wiped away many of her scornful words. Their eyes met for a moment, then Brice repeated her 'Good-night,' and added 'Magdalen' almost under his breath.

Lady Mary had gone on, but waited for her friend at the top of the stairs.

'Well, dearest?' Magdalen shook her head.

'He fancies he will come back to ask me. Say no more about it till then.' But all the same there was a light in her eyes and a smile of conscious pride on her lips. She had avenged her womanhood, or so she thought.

'Frank,' said Lady Mary that night. 'Frank, I've succeeded—or all but, that is—'

'Humph! Well, I'm sorry for him; you know I never approved, she's too—too—'

'Hush, you naughty man, I know what you are going to say—but you don't understand Magdalen. There is so much good in her, so much nobility—'

'So much of many things. A fine mixture.'

'So are we all. However, that will be Brice

Leslie's affair, and the poor fellow is madly in love. I left them alone a little this afternoon, and I think they used the opportunity.'

'When does the Magdalen not use it?' inquired Frank sceptically; then Lady Mary declared he was unfair to her friend and that she would tell him no more. 'We shall miss them very much,' she added, 'for Brice Leslie leaves to-morrow and Magdalen a few days after.'

'Where is she going?' asked Frank.

'Mrs. Stewart is still unwell, and Magdalen declares she will go back to town in order to nurse her. Fancy Magdalen in town now! She will be bored to death.'

'Bored!' said Frank; 'that word ought to be taken out of the language.'

'That won't stop the disease, and it seems pretty general. However, once married she will have enough trouble to keep her in health and spirits.'

The next day Magdalen did not appear at breakfast, but sent word she had a cold. Brice, however, went about looking intensely miserable, even though Captain Milton was cheerfulness itself, and when the time came for him to take

leave, as he was going by train, he asked Lady Mary if there were no chance of saying good-bye to Miss Cuthbert. Brice fancied he spoke and looked as usual, little knowing that Lady Mary possessed the key of his sadness. She smiled as he asked this question.

'Wait a moment, I'll send up and see if she is coming down. It is too bad of her to—to stay away.'

'I am afraid she is suffering,' said Brice anxiously. 'In fact it is depressing weather, and I think I am indulging in a sore throat.'

'The weather has much to bear, it certainly must be a great philosopher. Now, when may we expect to see you again? Miss Cuthbert stays till Thursday, why don't you ride over and wish her good-bye then?'

Brice looked relieved. 'Thank you, that will be best; wish her—good-bye for me now. I owe you so many thanks for a very pleasant visit, Lady Mary, but how shall I thank you?'

'You have forgotten the play, the gratitude is on my side. You and Magdalen were great successes. I hope you will keep up that character.

Good-bye; you must go at once, Frank is beckoning.' Brice hurried off, but retraced his steps. 'Will you tell her that I will ride over on Thursday—for lunch, if I may?'

'Yes, yes; come by all means—you will be always welcome.'

Then Brice drove away, looking up surreptitiously at Magdalen's window, to see if by chance she were there, but all was silence.

Magdalen had really caught a slight cold, but the reason of her absence was a wish to avoid a leave-taking. 'He will come back,' she said several times to herself, 'he will come back a free man. Brice, Brice, if you only knew! This time it is the biter bit. This time—Brice, Brice.' She knelt at the window, and, peeping through a crack, looked at his retreating figure as if she would willingly follow him.

As for Brice, he drove away in a kind of dream, a nightmare rather. The deluge had overtaken him, the waters were all about him, and he could see them rising visibly whilst he looked on fascinated and horrified, yet quite unable to act. Was he really himself—the Brice Leslie who in

his youth had been able to look on coldly at the follies of others, who had at times found himself wondering at such things being able to tempt men away from their ambitions and their superior interests? Who was this Brice Leslie who was ready now to throw away everything, every consideration, every standard of right and honour, for a woman no longer young, no longer capable of giving a man what is a woman's best gift—youth and simple loving devotion, a woman who would require everything of him and perhaps would be incapable or unwilling to give much in return?

Yet this mad love, born in such a strange manner, was really engendered by all that was noblest in Brice. One could almost have said that nature was revenging herself for past scorn of her rights, that Brice was bound to learn suffering through love and love through suffering, that his beautiful ideal courtship of Griselda was not to be given to him to enjoy (having paid no price for it), that man cannot live in the ideal without sooner or later finding that some perverse demon will revenge itself and pull down his fair palace.

One side of his nature craved only to keep true

to his first love, to reject all temptation of those domineering senses, to reject this wild infatuation and rest in the sublime and passionless repose of an ideal nature; but, on the other side he found this fortress attacked by a powerful foe, a foe who scorned all obstacles, a foe who was ready and willing to break down every barrier, even at the expense of losing a limb in the realisation. It was a strange combat, a combat more common than one would imagine, but for that reason jealously kept secret. When poor humanity comes out of the conflict it comes out determined that none shall know of the warfare, whether there has been victory or defeat. But once freed, that soul never again doubts the doctrine of a dual life, that life which Christianity, with sublime insight, expresses in her creeds as the fight between good and evil, and which the heathen world ascribed to strife in a far-reaching pantheism.

But the material world rolls on its way heedless of spiritual combats, and day and night monotonously succeed each other. Man, if he does not live by bread alone, cannot live without it, though he may crush down his emotions, and the mundane

existence of labour, of coming and going, of meals and useless remarks, goes on like a treadmill in its ceaseless round.

Still, even in this material existence, Brice felt that something was wrong. His forehead burned, and, in spite of its being a warm day, he shivered as he entered the train, no longer doubting he really had a bad sore throat. Was he ill? Perhaps it was only the excitement he had gone through. Anyhow, when he got home, he would be sure to find the doctor there, for he came every evening to see his father; he might just ask him if there was something wrong.

He ought to go to Foy Lodge that evening and see Griselda, but the very idea made him feel wretched. He had told her of his expected return —that was due to her; but, when he saw her, how explain the true facts to her? how tell her that— Good God! he could not imagine himself doing it; and yet he had promised Magdalen to go back to her a free man. Should he write? How should he word such dishonourable conduct, how—?

When Brice stepped down from the train he found his sister waiting for him in the pony-

carriage, and the matter-of-fact appearance of this lady was almost comforting to him in his present state of mind. She was one of the human beings who prefer announcing disagreeable reports to saying agreeable things.

'It is time you came back,' she said, handing Brice the reins. 'Griselda Foy has been plunged in gaiety this week. Mrs. Foy is flattered by the notice her daughter has attracted. The Duchess of Blackwater has called on the Foys, and of course it was at her son's instigation. It is a pity you don't insist on making your engagement public.'

For a moment it seemed to Brice that a door of escape was opened to him; then, suddenly thinking of Griselda, it was shut again. Whatever he might be, *she* was incapable of anything that was not true, as incapable as he would have believed himself to be six months ago.

'What nonsense!' he said impatiently.

'What's the matter with you, Brice? You look ill. I suppose Lady Mary has kept you hard at work with all her silly fads and fancies. Father seems worse, and mother is more anxious.' Brice only replied with monosyllables, and when he reached

home he found the doctor was upstairs, so solaced himself with a cigar till he came down. He felt much worse now, and a dim idea of something wrong took possession of him.

He had not to wait long before he heard Dr. Spenser's step. Brice asked him to come into the library.

'Glad to see you home. The Admiral wants cheering up a little; not worse really, but—*you* don't look first-rate.'

'That's what I wanted to ask you. It may be nothing, but I have a queer sort of feeling in my throat.' The doctor examined it carefully, felt his pulse, went through the usual formalities of the profession.

'Look here, this is serious. Very sorry for you, but it's best you should know the truth at once. This looks to me like diphtheria. It may pass off, but you must go to bed and be isolated.' Brice smiled, and lifted his eyebrows.

'Well, doctor, telegraph for a nurse. I mustn't give my sister any more trouble, or the old people needless anxiety. I'll retire into private life, that's all.'

'Safest way; it may be nothing.' The doctor went away, thinking in his own mind that Brice Leslie was a plucky fellow; the truth being that Brice was relieved by the feeling that, at all events, he could now put off the evil day. He could see no one—that was a fact he hailed with relief, even if the relief were attended with bodily pain.

Presently, however, the bodily overpowered the mental agony. There was sorrow and anxiety enough for his friends and relations. Griselda, who came every day to get news, became visibly thinner and paler, but she kept up bravely. She had her home duties to attend to, and she was not going to make others as miserable as she was herself. Her mother needed much attention just then, and her father was worried about his wife. Griselda faced her duties like a brave woman, and no outsider would have given her credit for so much strength of character and such firm purpose as she now showed.

The days dragged heavily by, and it became generally known that Brice Leslie was very ill. Every day the doctor's reports were more gloomy, and Griselda's eyes grew larger; they had a scared look in them, as if something were going out of her

life. Brice might not talk or write, she only had the daily news given to her in no comforting vocabulary by Miss Leslie, who one day remarked—

'Brice is worrying about something, the nurse says, something apparently about a promised visit to a Miss Cuthbert. She acted in that play. I daresay it is of no consequence, but if I knew her address I would write.'

'I know her,' said Griselda, 'she is a great friend of Lady Mary Milton. I will get her address, and, by the way, papa and I are going to London the end of this week to see about a new governess for Evie—I will call on Miss Cuthbert. She will know what Brice means. Does he like my flowers and my notes?' she asked suddenly. 'O Miss Leslie! it seems so dreadful not to see him—not to be able to do anything for him. But I mean to be brave; Brice will praise me some day when he hears of it, and when we talk over this dreadful time.' Griselda's eyes filled with tears, but with a strong effort she forced them back.

To herself she said, 'I feel as if I would willingly take his place, even if I had to die.

CHAPTER XVII

GRISELDA FOY stood by the old carved mantelpiece in the dining-room, waiting for her father to come down-stairs. She held a little note from Miss Leslie in her hand; it contained these words: 'We are so glad you are kindly going to call at Miss Cuthbert's house. Brice is always repeating her name in his delirium, and there is evidently some promise weighing on his mind—so, at least, the nurse seems to think. You can imagine my trouble; I cannot leave my father, who is much worse because of his anxiety about Brice, and the doctor is fearful of infection. We send our love, and we know how you share our constant anxiety.'

There was a change in Griselda. Any one with an attentive eye could have seen that, though it was hard to define where the change lay. The

lithe girlish figure still looked full of health and life, the same sweet brave smile still lighted up the face when her own people spoke to her and required her help—and everybody did require Griselda's sunshine; but there was something in the expression of her eyes that was terribly pathetic. The pleading look of a deer, or that possessed by some dogs, gives a faint idea of this new expression; the childlike gaze had entirely gone away. Just now, as she fingered the note and re-read the words, her pupils dilated, and she leant her graceful head against the carved work, dreamily reading over the words of the old motto again—

'*À Dieu Foy,*
Aux amis Foyer.'

'Brice, Brice,' she murmured, '"*A Dieu Foy*"; we looked at that together. I have not trusted enough; I never expected any trouble; everything was sunshine, and I thought it would always be so, and now—' Griselda paused, a dim thought, a vague anxiety, passed over her soul like a shadow over a deep pond—an anxiety which Griselda would not even put into words, so utterly startling and strange was it; but the letter in her hand had

put it into her mind, and almost unconsciously she tore it into pieces and flung it into the paper-basket.

Then she brushed back her shining hair as if this action would drive away the ideas, and once more she traced out the motto with her rosy fingers.

So pure, so fresh, so graceful and lithe she looked, as she stood there, that one could easily imagine a barbarian falling down at her feet to worship this goddess come down among men. But the look of untroubled peace had fled, the merry, joyous tones no longer sounded through the house: Griselda was learning by suffering.

At this moment she heard her father's step in the hall, and, hastily seizing a list of commissions given to her by her mother, she went out to meet him.

'Ready, my dear? That's right. Your mother seems better. Not much better news of poor Brice? Well, well, it's too early to despair.'

Griselda suddenly laid her head upon her father's shoulder.

'Papa, life was so beautiful in New Zealand, and now—' She lifted her eyes and he saw the dazed look in them, it was as if the girl had looked at

some horrible picture which had remained fixed on her mental vision.

'When Brice gets well, my dear, we will let everything become public; this concealment is rather trying for you.'

'No, no, papa. Don't tell any one of—our engagement; it is much better as it is; this—this illness would be harder to bear, if every one began to sympathise. Papa, I didn't mean to say anything—you know I did not, but just for a minute I forgot—I am so young and foolish, too young for Brice, I am afraid. But—he, he—' She paused, then, altering her tone, 'Papa, he will get well, he cannot die, our motto helps me so much—

'"*À Dieu Foy,*
Aux amis Foyer."

There would always be a home for Brice here, and love too, even if he did all sorts of odd things wouldn't there? I'm supposing such queer things, and I only mean that we Foys have always been true, haven't we? It's quite a fault with us.'

Mr. Foy did not listen very attentively to all this; he knew Griselda was terribly anxious about her lover, he could see that in her face. He knew

Brice was in great danger, but he made the best of it to his child. She meant, of course, if Brice died he must not force her to marry another; but time would settle all that — time that softens so many things. At this moment, a day in London, he thought, would change her gloomy ideas.

'Yes, dear, we are an obstinate race. I believe there is no fear of a Foy giving up his faith or his friend. Now, come, we must not be late.'

All the way to town Griselda held an envelope in her hand, on which Lady Mary had written Miss Cuthbert's address. Lady Mary had sent a kind letter to Griselda, saying she was extremely sorry to hear of Mr. Leslie's dangerous illness, and that if she, Griselda, happened to be near Wilton Crescent, she was sure Miss Cuthbert would much like to hear all the latest particulars she knew about him. Lady Mary was prudent; she said no more, but she wondered if Griselda Foy would understand.

When their business was done, Griselda was ready with her request.

'Papa, I want to go and see Miss Cuthbert, I met her at Lady Mary Milton's, and —— it won't

interest you to come. We can meet at the station, I will take a cab.'

Mr. Foy was surprised, for it was very strange for Griselda to take a fancy for strangers; however, he was not a man to object.

'Very well. I'll go to my club and meet you again at Waterloo. Don't be late.'

She smiled her answer, and half an hour later she was ringing the bell at Miss Cuthbert's house in Wilton Crescent. Griselda's heart beat fast, her colour came and went, her hand trembled; suppose Miss Cuthbert should not be there; suppose—

Miss Cuthbert was at home, and Griselda sent up her card, and was soon shown into a drawing-room with folding-doors thrown open. The room was empty, and Griselda sitting down with her back to the window had time to admire the exquisite taste of everything in it. It was not filled like a curiosity-shop with endless varieties of knicknacks, china of all dates, ornaments of no date, furniture of Queen Anne's time as imitated in the days of Queen Victoria; but there was a rich simplicity about everything, a unity of idea, a harmony of colour; there was what, for want of a

better expression, we might call a 'classic reserve' in everything. The books, too, indicated a taste both choice and wide, and the prints were rare. There were beautiful modern water-colours and one oil picture in a corner. Griselda could see it was good, though she did not know enough to tell that it was a Guercino.

'This is exactly how a modern room ought to be furnished,' thought Griselda, knowing it was right, though not knowing why. 'It is just the house she ought to live in; everything is perfect, fit for her. No wonder—'

There was a long sweep of softest drapery, and Magdalen herself opened the door. Griselda noted that the owner of the house did indeed match the room; she had on an exquisite grey silk tea-gown which softened all that was hard in her face.

Griselda for a moment became conscious that she herself was dressed in a simple blue print, and that her gloves were soiled; then she forgot all these minor defects in sudden admiration of Magdalen. Her heart seemed to beat so violently that she could not speak at first, and there rose

before her mind's eye the vision of the paper-basket where Miss Leslie's note lay torn into small pieces.

Then, looking up again quickly, the young girl noted a strange expression on Miss Cuthbert's face; she saw that she looked pale and worn, that her face had a thin, pinched look, and that her dazzling beauty seemed half veiled. Six months ago Griselda could not have told that these signs denoted mental suffering, now she immediately drew this conclusion—'Miss Cuthbert is anxious about something or somebody.' Again her tongue seemed to be paralysed, and it was without a word that she held out her hand.

'I did not expect to see you,' said Magdalen quietly, though her tone expressed no surprise, 'but perhaps you have come in by chance. Are you staying in London?'

'Oh no, no! I could not do that when—do you know?—Mr. Leslie is so dangerously ill—and—they let him see no one; diphtheria is so catching, and oh! it is such a terrible disease. Indeed, even if he gets better they will not let any one—not me even—see him for a long time.'

Miss Cuthbert had looked at her with her

wondrous strange blue eyes as she spoke, and then without saying a word seemed to motion her to sit down; but this time she, Magdalen, took her place with her back to the light and motioned Griselda to a chair opposite, where all the autumn glow fell on her face and made visible every varying expression. There was no need of such strong light, however, to see the alteration in the girl's face. What had been like a ray of pure sunshine seemed now touched with the cold finger of despair, lightly touched perhaps, but she had felt the first chill of it. Mechanically Magdalen repeated to herself, 'She is a child, she would love anybody. She will forget him—just now, of course, she is troubled; but—'

'It is a dreadful thing,' she said quietly, and her tone sounded strangely calm and cold when compared with Griselda's accent of acute pain, 'but you need not conclude that—the worst results will follow, Miss Foy.'

Griselda leant her head on her hand, and this action, the action of an older person, gave something pathetic to the whole girlish figure. There was a pause—Griselda was evidently thinking deeply, and then rising quickly she made a few

steps towards Magdalen; but the cold, immoveable, imperturbable figure appeared to stop her as if the elder woman's stronger will had bidden her not to approach her. Griselda sank down on her chair again.

'Please forgive me for being so—so stupid and restless. I don't know how I have got through this second week of it. I try never to remain idle for a moment; I dare not think. Miss Cuthbert, you know him, that is why I have come here—no—it was another reason as well.' Griselda clasped her hands round her knees and bent forward a little, but that beautiful woman opposite to her remained cold and impassive; it seemed as if Griselda were talking to a person utterly indifferent to her words and her grief.

'Indeed—what other reason?'

'I knew you would like to hear about him—any one who knows Brice really, must care to hear—and besides—' The rest of the sentence seemed to stick in her throat; her lips refused to utter it.

'Besides?'

'Besides, he is always speaking about you, asking for you—'

Magdalen actually felt her colour rising, knew her hand trembled; only she pressed it firmly against her knee, and pretended to pick out a little loose thread from her gown.

'This is what is reported to you,' she said, and laughed her short, strange laugh, 'but as you have not seen him, most likely he merely mentioned my name once. The play probably stuck in his memory.'

'That is true, it is only what they tell me.' Then she put her hand wearily on her forehead, leaning her elbow on the Chippendale table. 'No, they said something else—about some promise. I daresay you can explain.'

'Explain the wanderings of fever; indeed, that is beyond my power, Miss Foy. You give me credit for more talent than falls to my share.'

'Then is it nothing—cannot you understand? cannot you send him a message that will—ease his mind, comfort him? People do understand—I've heard our doctor say so—even when they appear to be quite light-headed. If you were to say it was all right, or that you did not want to know any more, or anything, Brice might be comforted.'

'It is very unlikely,' said Magdalen slowly.

'Had we not better let the doctor and the nurse manage their patient in their own way?'

'Oh!' gasped Griselda, 'you do not know—you cannot surely understand about—me—and him? I thought that night when we saw you near the fountain at Rosehill that you knew I was—that we were lovers. If not, I should not have dared to come here, just to—talk about him; but you, except our own people, are the only person who knows our secret, and—I—may I say it, Miss Cuthbert?—I couldn't help liking you the first time I saw you.' Griselda blushed as she made this remark. There was something so trusting in her words, in her tone, that Magdalen in spite of herself was touched, although she argued proudly that the admiration of a girl so young and so simple was utterly valueless to her.

'It was very kind of you, Miss Foy,' she said. Though the words sounded slightly ironical, Magdalen did not imagine for a moment that Griselda would hear or recognise her tone, but to her surprise she appeared to do so, for she lifted her eyes and looked at Magdalen reproachfully, though she said nothing about the irony.

'Don't call me Miss Foy. Everybody calls me Griselda. Near you I feel so young and so ignorant. You are so clever, and—I may say, mayn't I?—so beautiful, that I don't wonder every one admires you. I should never have had the courage to come here, if—if—it hadn't been for Brice's sake. I wish I could explain myself about him. You don't know how much I love him, I can't explain it to myself even; it began when I was a child. He used to come and stay with us for a few weeks at a time between his journeys into the interior; I think I learnt to know all his thoughts almost, and yet I remained just my stupid self as well. Is that foolish?'

Magdalen lay back in the arm-chair half wearily, as if all this *naïve* confession bored her slightly.

'Everybody is influenced in a different way, I believe.'

'You can explain all that, I know, but I can't; I only know that I love him—that my feeling is quite apart from his—caring about me; that I think of his happiness before my own. Oh, I'm sure I do!'

'We are apt to think that till we are tried.'

Magdalen's tone was more interested now. This simple girl, after all, was not quite colourless, not merely an easily-influenced individual, who could be acted upon by any outside force stronger than herself. 'But the truth is our deepest feelings centre round an invariable nucleus of self.'

'You say so, clever people say so, I suppose, but it isn't really always true; it isn't true with me. If it were to make Brice happy I would—' Griselda paused, and suddenly Magdalen lost the feeling that she was talking to a child, or that a child was talking to her; she bent forward and looked at her as if she would find the flaw in this young soul, which from its very purity and simplicity seemed so strong that Magdalen's passionate nature was touched, nay, even surprised out of herself.

'Yes, there is the test; in reality how little you would do! Would you — let me paint an imaginary picture—would you let another woman take his love from you? would you let her by the strength of her—passion—forgive me the word, you are almost too young to understand it,—turn his pure deep affection into a burdensome weight?

would you allow her to crush his manhood till he gave up the struggle, and perhaps in the far future lived to repent?—I have seen that done.'

Griselda's soft rounded cheeks were covered with deep blushes, as Magdalen, in a quick passionate utterance, painted her picture. It was as if she had taken that girl's soul in her hands and forced it to bear the pressure of suffering humanity, but in the process the innate purity of Griselda's being felt the scorching, blasting power of the world's cruelty.

'Yes, I would,' she said quietly, though as she spoke the tears fell slowly down her cheek. 'I love him so much that I would give up everything for him, and I should feel that in doing this I should still keep the best part of him, the part that trusted me and believed I would do everything for his happiness and not for my own.'

There was a pause and a deep silence, a silence that seemed more terrible than the most awful storm. The old square highly-chased clock on the chimney-piece ticked aloud, marking time that was flying in its inexorable, invariable proportion.

Magdalen looked at the girl before her, and a strange new feeling of surprise came over her. It was something new, something she could not fathom, something which—with her many-sided character, where self was the centre facet of every rose—she had not before believed possible; even now she doubted, doubted because doubt was so easy to her, because much as she believed in abstract generosity, abstract nobility, abstract self-renunciation, she was utterly sceptical about the reality of them in the conduct of woman or of man. She had the feeling expressed by Satan in the poem of Job: 'Doth Job fear God for nought . . . but put forth Thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse Thee to Thy face.' Either Griselda Foy did not love Brice, as Magdalen understood love, or she herself was incapable of understanding this creed—an emblem, if true, of God-like unselfishness. But if she, Magdalen, were wrong? If — the very thought humbled her, but she was not conquered yet, not convinced, for doubt is as strong as faith; if the latter works miracles, the former will destroy strong and apparently impregnable fortresses. Magdalen

heaved a little sigh; it came from the depth of a heart that had been wounded in many a fight, that had striven in vain to find peace, and that now, on the threshold of so-called happiness, was stopped by an obstruction so slight, so despised, that she looked down upon it in mute surprise.

Suddenly she rose from her chair and stood up before Griselda in all her womanly beauty. Everything about her was made to dazzle; she delighted in the sight of it herself, and not only for the effect it might have on others. If she were made up of powerful contradictions, she was, through the same contradictions, capable of surprising herself and others. Griselda also stood up, she felt time was slipping away, she must not miss her train; but she had not yet accomplished her purpose.

'I must go now,' she said simply, so simply that it seemed impossible to believe she had spoken just now above herself, above poor human nature; 'but we were forgetting, Miss Cuthbert—I came here to get a message for Brice. It may be just what he wants to—to ease his mind.'

Magdalen came close to Griselda; tall as was

this latter, Magdalen was a little taller, and not slight nor lithe. In that moment of contact, when Magdalen's soft silk touched with lightest rustle Griselda's blue cotton, there came over the elder woman, the woman of the world, a feeling belonging as it seemed to some former state of existence perhaps, some former consciousness of other worlds where she had been a mother, where a child's innocent lips had touched hers and a child's fair curls had lain on her bosom. Without a word she put her strong arm round Griselda, and drew down the girl's head on her shoulder. 'Poor child,' she said softly, 'you love him very much, you will make him happy, you must.' Griselda's self-control almost gave way, there was a little sob heard mingling with the ticking of the clock. 'I—I would give my life for his.'

'Hush, child, you need not do that—believe me—you will be happy yet. He will get well; Griselda, kiss me, child; I think that—I—who believe in so little, I must believe in you. Now go—I will send Mr. Leslie a message—soon.'

With a little cry of happiness Griselda flung her arms round Magdalen's neck. 'I love you, Miss

Cuthbert — always—whatever you do, because—' No, that sentence could not be, never was finished.

An hour later Magdalen still sat there like some sphinx of the desert some grand unearthly Greek goddess. Her bosom heaved as if life were slowly ebbing away, as if she had detached herself from all that was human, all that made life worth having; she seemed to be looking into the future as she gazed fixedly into vacancy; dim spectres seemed to come and go before her, strange shapes conjured up from past dreams of youthful delight; she felt this whole world of spirits was fighting against her and she against them; and, more distinct than any of them, rose the image of Brice Leslie—but Brice Leslie in the future, the man who might some day reproach her for that which he now craved for; then, in a golden background of pure light, Griselda appeared, and at the end of all Magdalen rose and lifted her arms high above her and clasped them over her head. 'She loves,' she said, 'but perhaps I have never loved before. Suppose I—I—— Is it possible?'

CHAPTER XVIII

THIS evening Magdalen could not think uninterruptedly about herself; that was doubtless a blessing, a great blessing in her present frame of mind. Mrs. Stewart was ill and was a little exacting about attention and attentions. Miss Cuthbert was not a good nurse; she had always enjoyed splendid health, and looked upon the many weak beings of the world with a sort of dumb pity which was not at all akin to love. She had very right ideas about health, thinking it was a greater title of honour than nervous or sentimental weakness; but when she set herself to nurse Mrs. Stewart, she did it with all her might. Thoroughness had a charm for Magdalen, that is, as long as the inclination to do the thing lasted.

Her old friend's bell made her suddenly remember her long absence from her bedside, and she walked to the glass and rearranged her hair.

This little touch of vanity was very characteristic of Magdalen. She would not have liked even Mrs. Stewart to have seen an unlovely line about her; it was this fastidiousness about her appearance that had led spiteful tongues—especially women's tongues—to say that Miss Cuthbert was always posing; to such an accusation Lady Mary had once answered, 'Oh, there is posing and posing, Magdalen's posing is born of a fine sense of fitness and artistic feeling; in that sense every one *ought* to pose, it is their duty.' Whereupon a plain spinster had answered that Lady Mary would be sure to defend all Miss Cuthbert's actions, even if she committed murder. 'Well, of course,' answered the incorrigible champion, 'if she committed a murder, it would be a fine crime, there would be something worth studying in the details.' What is the use of arguing with an advocate who is not ashamed to bring forward such a defence?

'What a long visit some one paid you, Magdalen; I want my tea. Did they stay all that time?' said Mrs. Stewart.

'No, dear, I am sorry; I have been—dreaming of plans—and I forgot everything else.'

'That is very unlike you; I have noticed a change in you lately, let me look at you.'

'I don't think my health need make any one anxious,' said Magdalen, laughing.

'But you trifle with it dreadfully, sooner or later you must pay for such imprudence.'

Mrs. Stewart was always happy when she was slightly indisposed, and happier still if she could make herself believe that Magdalen had a mysterious malady which, though it gave no outward sign whatever, would, like a so-called extinct volcano, some day burst forth when least expected.

'I am well, quite well; I will give you full warning when I feel a serious illness approaching.' Magdalen rang the bell for tea, then sat down by the invalid's sofa. She was still absent-minded, however, but she took up a piece of silk embroidery and stitched diligently to hide her strange silence. At last, forcing herself to speak, she added—

'It was Miss Foy who came; I told you about her. She is the girl who was thrown from her horse and was brought in to Rosehill by Mr. Leslie. It was quite a romantic little episode.'

'Why did she come?'

'Oh, well, she admires me, I think, but she is almost a child; one half expects to see her in short frocks. However, she is pretty, very pretty. She made quite a sensation at Lady Mary's party.'

'It is all through me that you have come back to this dull place, dear Magdalen. You have so many invitations, won't you accept one of them and leave me?'

Mrs. Stewart only half meant her unselfish speech, but in that she resembled many another speaker.

'No, indeed, I really like it. London has a strange fascination for me now that one meets no one. It seems to make life a little more real; but I was going to say, dear, that I want to go and spend a day in the country soon, not far off, in Lady Mary's neighbourhood. I can come back in the evening, or at least the next morning, as I may sleep at Rosehill. You won't mind? Andrews will look after you, I know, better than I can do.'

'You have been very good to me, Magdalen; I wish—yes, with all my heart, that you could make up your mind to—give some one else the right to —to love you.'

Magdalen frowned, Mrs. Stewart must indeed be presuming on her indisposition to dare to say this to her.

'We agreed long ago to respect each other's private affairs,' she said, a little haughtily. Then a maid came in with a dainty tea-service, and that happy meal brought another turn to the dangerous conversation.

When she retired to her room that evening, and after her beautiful hair had been brushed, Magdalen dismissed her maid, saying she wanted nothing more; then a very strange thing took place. She went to her wardrobe and looked over a somewhat large assortment of dresses and mantles, and choosing the simplest black silk skirt she could find she put it on and dressed herself entirely as if she were going out of doors. She even put on her hat and the simple cloak adorned with soft real lace. The hat, though of plain black straw, was perfect in shape and trimmed with handsome black ostrich feathers; when fully dressed, she lighted two more wax candles, and by the increased light examined herself attentively in the glass. She had no ornaments except one simple crystal locket set

round with diamonds. The locket was meant to contain hair, but it had nothing in it now. Evidently the effect was satisfactory, for Magdalen smiled with pleasure and then laughed a little ironically at herself for being able to care. This done she took off the out-door garments, wrapped herself in a dressing-gown, and walked slowly up and down the room.

'I *must* go to-morrow,' she said at last, aloud, 'I *must.* My courage will only hold out just long enough; who knows even if it will hold out as long as that! Is it really I who am going to do this? I can't believe it—and afterwards? Afterwards? afterwards—is there any afterwards? What is it that splendid dreamer, Leconte de Lisle, says?' She paused before a bookshelf of foreign books and took down a volume of poems, entitled *Poèmes Tragiques;* her long supple fingers turned its pages swiftly over till she found the verse she remembered, under the title of 'L'Illusion suprême.'

> 'Tout cela Jeunesse, amour, joie et pensée,
> Chante de la mer et les forêts, souffle du ciel;
> Emportant à plein vol l'espérance insensée,
> Qu'est-ce que tout cela, qui n'est pas éternel?'

She put back the volume and took down another—evidently this poet was a favourite of hers, and the next lines she found had previously been marked.

> 'Et toi, divine Mort, où tout rentre et s'efface,
> Accueille tes enfants dans ton sein étoilé;
> Affranchis-nous du temps, du nombre et de l'espace,
> Et rends-nous le repos que la vie a troublé.'

'He believes in a happy previous state of existence as well as in the after Nîrvana,' she said to herself, 'and I—I—don't know what to believe! But the present, the present is one's own; at all events, one can act in this life.'

Then the image of Griselda Foy forced itself again on her mind· 'How simple she is, and yet she is such a riddle. I believe she spoke the truth. Can I believe *that?* Yes, I do, I do—I *will* not doubt it. Once, when I first knew Percy, I too—no, I was never like that, but I too could believe as she does. But then to have felt faith in man, in God, in everything slipping away, loosening itself insensibly from one's grasp, one's heart, one's brain—that was dreadful, but was it worse than this?'

Magdalen put back her poet on the shelf and went to open her window. It was chilly now, the

night was cold, and she shivered. The strength of her fierce struggles had exhausted her, and soon closing the window she went to bed. As she lay there in the darkness some old familiar words floated through her brain, it was long since she had thought of them or used them, but now they seemed to come unbidden to her memory: 'I will arise, and go to my Father.'—'No,' she said aloud, 'no, to—to—Brice! O Brice! is it because I love you, or because I think I love you?'

Then very soon a soft unconsciousness drew a merciful veil over her brain, and in spite of all anxiety Magdalen Cuthbert fell fast asleep.

A good many miles away from Wilton Crescent there was another watcher, another whose physical weakness at times clouded his intellect and at times abnormally sharpened his perceptions, till the keen vibrations of thought caused a new agony never before experienced by the sick man. Brice Leslie could, at times, see and rehearse the past so plainly, that it seemed to him impossible to believe that he was not in truth reacting it. The human brain is so delicately balanced that one is

tempted to imagine that a perfectly sane, well-balanced cellular brain department must belong only to a very few of the human race. Sometimes one is even inclined to think that any great talent, any great emotion, any trace of genius, is the result of some derangement of the brain cellules, some dimly explained or unexplainable disturbance of the grey matter, where scientific philosophers lodge our intellectual activity and our active emotions. This idea helps one to realise the repugnance with which some natures view all passion, all that passes the boundary of the ordinary. There may be, in fact, as direct a satisfaction in contemplating the commonplace as there is in looking at a person in rude health, a feeling which can hardly be explained to any one who, on the contrary, craves for what is extraordinary and unbalanced. The first could echo the words of the French poet—

> 'Je haïs la passion et l'esprit me fait mal :
> Aimons-nous doucement.'

The other, in his lassitude of all emotions and finding none that could sufficiently move him, could exclaim, with another famous Frenchman—

> 'Je suis venu trop tard dans un monde trop vieux.'

Strangely enough, Brice Leslie, as he lay on his sick-bed, from unavoidable circumstances left entirely alone, except for his professional nurse—a woman whose excellent training had taken away all her natural art of nursing and sympathy—was pursued alternately by these two extremes. Sometimes he looked back with intense longing to the mental calm of his New Zealand life, to the happy, almost unemotional, experience during the long growth of his love for Griselda Foy. At other times all these thoughts were hurled away in a mad tumult of passionate regrets, passionate longings for the sight of Magdalen. Then, too, he experienced a deep anguish that he had not cast all consideration to the winds, and that he had not taken advantage of the present, the time when, in a supremely happy moment for him, she had said, looking at him with those deep blue eyes, where happiness seemed to be rekindled from long-smouldering ashes, 'Forgive me, Brice.'

Then the passionate longing would at times suddenly cool down. Any long strain of emotional thought is apt to extinguish its own fire, and requires a new energy to rekindle it, obeying some

hidden law, some unknown boundaries which have been set to human sensations in order to protect them from themselves. At such moments, Brice felt distinctly that he did not wish to see Magdalen Cuthbert again, that she had cast over him a spell against which his higher nature rebelled, a nature which in him would surely reassert itself. If she prevailed, blight would inevitably follow, the blight of all strong purpose, the blight of all high ideals, whether of religious, physical, or intellectual work, without which a man cannot live, though a woman may be able to exist. Man cannot sustain his mental energy by love alone; the very durability of his race demands more from him, and by a saddened satiety provides the antidote against a moral decadence. But these thoughts, though true and founded on an innate creed, were succeeded by others, and in these he accused himself of being untrue to every high ideal and honourable feeling. He despised himself for being false, yet at the same time knowing he was incapable of determining his future course of action. After this came a period of still more severe bodily suffering, causing a partial cessation of brain activity. In his un-

conscious moments he felt himself pursued by the one idea of wishing to see Magdalen, of wishing to fulfil his promise to come back to her; whilst, in his periods of perfect consciousness, he experienced an intense feeling of quiet peace when Griselda's little notes of friendship (as the nurse read them aloud to him, Griselda could say very little but the kind commonplace) were daily brought into his room. At first he had turned his head towards the door every time it opened, expecting a letter from Magdalen, some line of sympathy, some words beneath which he could read love; but then he had argued that of course this was impossible for her, it would be too dangerous. After settling this, Brice relapsed into varying feelings, among which was one of suppressed rage at the illness itself. This time of waiting, of uncertainty, was what he had never foreseen, and brave as he was outwardly, never letting a murmur escape him, he was prolonging his pain and increasing his danger by his mental anxiety.

His father's illness was at this time increased by the anxiety he felt for his son, and Mrs. Leslie and her daughter were kept in close attendance on the

chronic invalid. Infection was of course much dreaded, neighbours would not approach the house, and Griselda's daily note was sent by post. Lady Mary also wrote occasionally to inquire, and passed on the answer to Magdalen. The former felt very unhappy that the engagement had not been a certain fact, but she comforted herself with the idea that a dangerous illness adds ten per cent. to the interest a woman feels for a man who loves her. Brice Leslie was bound to marry Magdalen, and she on her side would still further have her liking turned into pity, her pity into love. Lady Mary always argued neatly; her talents included the talent of seeing a proper fitness and a sequence of events with a strange clearness of insight, and her prophecies, when communicated to others in concise language, much helped to bring about their own fulfilment.

Brice's bedroom looked out upon a picturesque lane branching off from the main road, a lane seldom used except by the drivers of country carts or the clergyman's pony-carriage, occasionally driven down that side to reach an out-of-the-way hamlet. The house was old-fashioned and many-

gabled, faced with rough weather-tiles; there was a large flower and kitchen garden at the back, whilst in front one could see the blue distance through the overbranching trees of the country lane.

There was a peacefulness about the place which was very charming to weary folk, very soothing to overwrought nerves. Even Miss Leslie's commonplace remarks harmonised with the stillness; there was no fear of any outburst of mental energy on her part, as she went about her daily duties and of the servants' delinquencies made mountains out of molehills. She felt that it was very tiresome to have a nurse in the house—nurses were always so upsetting and required so much waiting upon; then Brice having contracted this infectious malady was the crown of all misfortune. She was one of those poor souls who trifle away happiness with trifling miseries, till it must be supposed that their misery becomes a pleasure and that they will accept even the perfections of heaven with a sigh.

Miss Leslie was of course methodical. Every day after luncheon she took a constitutional walk, usually to some cottages; for visiting the poor

was one of the few excitements she allowed herself—an excitement she could all the more enjoy, because it gave her the opportunity to deplore the thriftless ways of her neighbours. She always started at two o'clock, and came back at four. At half-past four she rang the bell for tea, after this she read aloud to her parents if they wished it, or she wrote the family letters. There is more pleasure than many persons understand in daily monotony, and certainly Miss Leslie enjoyed it to the full.

And now the most anxious period of Brice's illness had passed. He was still very ill, very weak, and the doctor said, highly infectious; but there was now hope he would pull through, if, that is, he did not have a relapse. Perfect quiet was ordered, and the nurse was a great martinet. Miss Leslie sometimes walked as far as Foy Lodge, and on these occasions she felt that it was a very unfortunate thing for Brice to be engaged to such a young girl as Griselda. Suppose she had been already his wife, what could she have known about nursing? In fact, she disapproved of the whole business, adding to her

other shortcomings a disbelief in the capabilities of young people.

The October sun was sinking one day when Miss Leslie, having been delayed by her father's indisposition, started off with her mother for a late constitutional drive. Brice was decidedly better, though dreadfully weak, but he was able to be left alone for a short time,—indeed, he said he preferred it,—so the nurse was asked, and somewhat ungraciously agreed, to sit with Mr. Leslie whilst his wife and daughter went for a very necessary change of air. They meant to drive to Foy Lodge, and as the carriage passed up the lane and emerged into the high road they saw a fly stop at the village inn, and a lady step out of it. Miss Leslie pointed her out to her mother, and as they both made much of any small event, wondered what elegant stranger could be putting up at such a humble place as 'The Wyvern.'

'It is rather late, too,' said Miss Leslie; 'perhaps it is merely a visitor to the Vicarage, their stable only takes in the pony-carriage.' This subject sufficed the two ladies for half an hour's conversation, so, without noticing it, they passed the

exquisite fir-wood, where the low slanting sunlight struck the red stems, and turned them into a quivering blaze of apricot-red. Then as they drove over one of the bridges of the canal, they did not even heed how the sunlight mirrored the surface of the water with glories which no painter could reproduce.

But all this intense beauty was not thrown away on the stranger, who—having told the fly-man to wait at the 'Wyvern' till her return—walked down the hill towards Gable End. Woman of the world she might be, and with many powers dwarfed for want of using them,—devoid, too, of that religious enthusiasm which, capable of elevating the human mind above itself, defies the lower nature to do its worst. In spite of this, Magdalen Cuthbert still possessed a poet's soul, and who shall positively deny that this did not replace in her much of that which Miss Leslie would have thought far more important.

On the crest of the slight rising, from which one could see the chimneys of Gable End, she paused and looked around her. No one was in sight; she was alone with nature. On her right she saw

the fields of richest colouring; the dividing hedges of golden autumn tints mingling with darkest green; waves of varying colour, over which the eye travelled with the same pleasure which the body experiences when carried over the swelling waves. In the deep blue distance rose a beautiful hill, round which the sky-line appeared to pencil a lighter halo of gold, a hill whose outline was made irregular by a thick crown of fir-trees, which recalled with their separated pinnacles the law of the lost and found.

Over all this the October sun was slowly sinking towards its bed of purple clouds, spread ready to receive it before the glory should disappear.

On the other side, the scene was less suggestive of field-labour. The country here consisted of pure heather land; the hills were diversified by threads of sandy roads, bordered by pines, whilst here and there larches and oak-trees made sharp contrasts with the firs. Nearer still was the village church, of no particular architecture, and surmounted with an open turret, within which the one bell could be clearly seen; but, to make up for its poverty of outline, God's Acre, full of graves,

lay all around. It had been made out of barely-reclaimed heather land, where nature reasserted itself and sowed its heath flowers, its dwarf gorse, its purple rattle, its toad flax, and its hundred other minute blossoms, to ornament the nameless mounds of the poor, or to add greater glory to the headstones of the rich.

Magdalen looked at all this as if she were in a dream. Somehow, she could not realise life, she felt as if she herself were unreal, and that even the beauty about her was more like a vision than a reality. She could not analyse it, but in her present mood it seemed to fill her with that extraordinary sympathy some minds experience when face to face with inanimate nature; a sympathy which is so mysterious that no philosopher has attempted to explain it, nor indeed to be certain of its reality.

There was no one in sight, no possible witness to her actions, no reason to pose, no man or woman present to admire her. The intense stillness was almost irritating in its calmness; it did not even help her to look at anything calmly; on the contrary, it added to her emotion and to her uncertainty. It made her feel that life was a

mistake, that her life had been a failure, and that now by her own act she was going to deprive the future of hope, and make it as gloomy as the past. There would be nothing to look forward to, not even the calm impassibility of nature, nor its freedom from thought or feeling. Was anything worth troubling oneself about? was there such a thing as right and wrong, as good or evil? was it not all abstract feeling decided and crystallised by men, but as varying as the shapes of crystallised particles? At one time the race believed in one shape, at another in its opposite; but the thing itself was incapable of discovery, and after all, perhaps, not worth discovering.

Such were Magdalen's thoughts for a moment, as she stood there on the crest of the hill and heaved a deep sigh which brought her no relief. Then with the suddenness of man's — or shall we say woman's—varying thought, her wavering feelings were in a moment transformed into certainty.

'If there is a higher Power, if we are not merely cast here to wander on where our disposition leads us, then there may be some good in this,—then I

may make up for something else, that is if the whole idea of making up is tenable. There must be such a Power, even though veiled in mystery; there must be—there must be. If there is, then God help me to believe in it, and in Him.'

She was once more the Magdalen Cuthbert, who in early youth had entered bravely into life's arena, meaning to come out of it with a patent of nobility; she was once more the true, unselfish woman she had felt herself capable of being—oh, so long ago it seemed!—so long ago. Her lips relaxed, her eyes lost their hard look, her slight frown gradually disappeared. As long as life lasts there is always a power of rising (though there are some who disbelieve this creed), there is always some spark that can be rekindled, if not kept alight, and there is always power to bring forth the unexpected.

She woke up from her trance and forced herself to think of the present and of the reason which had brought her here. She also had noticed the two ladies, and the landlord of the inn had pointed them out to her and named them, for she had just inquired where the Leslies lived. He had offered

to stop them for her, but she had refused imperatively, secretly delighted that so far chance had helped her. Now she walked down the lane till she came to the swing-gate that led up to the front door of Gable End. Magdalen paused; she had left everything to chance, and now she seemed unable to settle what to say, if she did go up and ring the bell; so she walked slowly down the road looking at the house over the palisade, which was edged with low laurels. Her quick glance took in more than the deliberate gaze of most people, she saw that the window beneath the front gable was only opened a little at the top and bottom, that the blind was half-drawn down, and that a small vase of flowers had been placed on the window-sill. That must be the sick-room, she decided; the scent of hothouse flowers had been too strong for the invalid and the nurse had placed them outside.

But how was she to get a sight of Brice, how speak to him? She had pondered over this without arriving at any solution. The danger of infection would cause every one to be denied an entrance, but Magdalen had determined that she would see

Brice, that she would speak to him if only for a minute.

Now, without further waiting, she gently pushed open the gate, and, not letting it swing back, she walked noiselessly up the path. The bright sunlight burst forth at this moment and was as quickly overshadowed by a passing cloud. Suddenly, Magdalen's doubts and hesitation were dispelled, for she found the front door standing open, and her mind was at once made up. Leaving her sunshade in a corner of the hall, she walked quickly up-stairs. There were no maids about, she saw the dining-room door standing wide open, and from a distant region came sounds of tea-cups; so, most likely, some of the maids were having their early tea. At the top of the stairs Magdalen paused to consider which could be Brice's room; in another moment she had decided. But now she heard close beside her a door creak on its hinges. Another instant and she walked towards an angle and placed herself behind it, and from this hiding-place she saw the nurse in her uniform walk down-stairs holding a tray in her hand. She had not come out of the room which Magdalen had already

settled was Brice's sick-chamber. Was she then mistaken? Perhaps so, but she would make sure. She heard the baize door below swing back, and in the short interval came the sound of female voices, undoubtedly belonging to servants who feel free of the ears of a strict mistress.

Magdalen walked straight to the room of the gable window and opened it softly. The first glance assured her she was right; she was in a sick-room, and in Brice's sick-room. There were no curtains to his bed, and he lay there with closed eyes, and so pale and gaunt-looking as to be barely recognisable. He must have been very near death's door, was he already entering it? A great pity awoke in Magdalen's heart, a love for the strong man brought low, which for the instant had a real touch of the motherly instinct.

She closed the door noiselessly, and walked a few steps forward. Her heart beat fast, she was doing an unheard-of thing, and at any moment she might be discovered. What would Brice himself think of her? what would he say to her?

She paused a few feet away from the bed, and Brice, fancying the nurse had returned,

opened his eyes; then, as in one of his feverish dreams, his glance met that of Magdalen's blue eyes. There she stood—dressed in soft clinging black — with a feathered hat he had seen at Rosehill, that softened away the harder outlines; and as he looked, never doubting for a moment that his brain was playing him this trick, he saw her lips part, he saw the living colour spread over her cheeks, and the smile that had often turned his head break forth. He started up, and in his poor weak altered voice he called her—'Magdalen.'

'Hush!' she said gently, and with a cadence of tone that he had never heard before, so that he thought Dante's Beatrice could never have been half so beautiful,—'Hush, Brice, I have come to see you for a moment only—to—to—' She could not say the word yet, it seemed to stick in her throat, to force itself back.

'Is it true?' he said, in his hoarse whisper; 'is it you, you yourself?' Then, partly realising the truth, with his thin, transparent hand he feebly waved her away—

'For God's sake, Magdalen; for God's sake, do

not come near me; there is still infection—you may be in danger.'

'I am not afraid; do not agitate yourself—see, I have no fears.' She came close to him and took his hand. The effort he had made was all he was equal to, his eyes now looked up only in mute appeal.

'Magdalen,' he repeated softly, but the word was only just audible.

'Do not speak,' she said, stooping a little so that her face seemed to him like a saint's head appearing above him; 'you have been very ill—but you are better now; Lady Mary sent me word that you were—I am glad, so very glad. You will get well—and you will forget me.'

He lifted his eyes mutely to hers, the pathos of the look brought tears into her blue eyes, as his lips tried to frame her name again.

'Yes, you will get well and you will be happy—I have seen your Griselda—Brice; don't turn away, but listen to me. I have so few minutes—I ought not to be here—what will they say to me? I have never spoken like this before to mortal man or woman, I never shall again. It has all been a

mistake, but—it was my fault partly—I played with fire, and then I cried when it burnt me. Brice, can you understand, I loved you first for having been good to Percy, for being such a true friend, and then because of—myself. I was so proud to have won a noble heart—and then—when I knew—No, I don't blame you; I see it all, I would not draw back. I am so vain, so proud, I would not draw back. But since then I have seen Griselda, I have thought it all out. She is good, so good that she will make you happy—because she is unselfish. And we—you and I, Brice—it might have been all a mistake. You would have got over the fancy; and I—I must have disappointed you—I know I should; we might even have got tired of each other, and I should have heard you reproach me. O Brice! I am so proud, so proud, I don't know what I should have done. Sometimes, I doubt everything—I doubt if I can love.'

She had spoken very quickly, very hurriedly, she hardly knew if she were saying what she meant to say; she had rehearsed it mentally several times, but those words were not forth-

coming—these did not express all she meant to say, but they were the first that her lips could frame. With another man, or with a man in strong health, the old Magdalen might have reappeared; she might have been cold or wayward or haughty, and she might have waited for the worship she expected; but all this was gone, and little as she guessed it she was a woman now, a woman who could have retained love as well as evoked it. If this mood could have lasted—if—

'Magdalen, you are a noble woman, you must despise me,' he said, trying to speak plainly. She shook her head.

'How can I despise any one? Listen, Brice, in my heart I believe—yes, I do believe, that I am still true to Percy—as you were.'

A light came into the sick man's eyes. He could not take his eyes from the beautiful face near to him.

'Then I may speak now—you would not let me before. His last words were of you. "If I could see her," he said, "she would forgive—she would pity me too much to turn away from me."'

Magdalen's eyes filled with tears. She seemed so much to want pity herself now: she wanted love so much, so much, and she was giving it up. Percy had lived to want it too—to want *her* love. She loosed Brice's hand and clasped hers together, suffering a silent concentrated pain which she could have explained to no one and which none could have understood.

Yes, Brice might have done so because he loved her, but he was too weak to think out any great thought. He knew that she was by his side, the rest he would remember afterwards.

At that moment Magdalen was recalled to the present by the sound of an opening door; she had stayed too long already, she must go. She stooped down and put her hand again on Brice's thin fingers, they were burning hot now, perhaps she had done him harm.

'Thank you, Brice, for telling me. I must go, I have made you worse. There—good-bye—some day you will thank me.'

'No—no.' He tried to shake his head, tried to clasp her cool hand. 'Stay.'

'No, but Brice—I came to say good-bye. Some

day, years hence, when there is no more pain, you will like to think that—I loved you.'

Before he could stop her — for just then the terrible fear for her safety again swept over him—she stooped down and kissed him.

'Good-bye, Brice, you will be happy—you are the only man I have kissed, except Percy and my father.'

'The danger,' he murmured, trying to raise her hand to his lips. 'Go, for God's sake, Magdalen, go.'

She stooped again and smoothed his hair, as she answered with the sad, pathetic little laugh of old—

'The danger—I know it—I—I—— Good-bye, Brice, if I might, I would say, God bless you.'

There was no time for more; a distant footstep was really audible as Magdalen moved away. She did not look back, but before Brice could do more than try to raise himself—try to call her once more 'Magdalen' — she was gone, and the door was softly shut. When the nurse came in she found that her patient, whom she had left so convalescent, had fainted away.

CHAPTER XIX

ON this very evening Lady Mary sat in her drawing-room, talking over plans with her husband. It was only a fortnight since the place had been so lively, and since all the world had praised her and her unique entertainment. She was reaping her reward, and so was Frank; only, in his case, the reward was not much appreciated. There were invitations everywhere and from everybody, on Lady Mary's table; there were letters from the most fashionable people, and lying about Frank Milton's studio were humble petitions for portraits by his hand.

'We shall have to go back to it all,' said Lady Mary, warming her feet at the fire, for it was a chilly evening and a tiny fire made the gathering darkness pleasant by contrast; 'but this fortnight has been very pleasant, hasn't it, Frank? this solitude in the country?'

'Yes; only it is too good to last, Polly,' he said; then, with an unusual exhibition of sentiment, he went to the back of his wife's chair and stroked her gold-shaded hair; 'but I fancy we might say that of heaven, and some people I could name would get weary of what they call "Nice solitude in the country," for instance.'

'That's too bad, Frank; you know I'm not tired of your society, sir, especially when you are in a good humour, and don't abuse my friends.'

'What friends, Lady Mary?'

'Why, Magdalen Cuthbert, of course. I am longing to proclaim to the world that "Marmaduke" and "Esther" are really wedded, and that they will be happy ever after—as happy as we are. Eh, sir, what do you say to that?' and Lady Mary put her hand up behind her head and found it, as she expected, clasped in Frank's hearty honest fist.

'My dear child, you and I differ on that subject. If you took a true view of that lady you would know she was a woman without a heart, who lives on admiration she does not even care to

possess. You forget what I can remember, there was—'

'Pray don't, Frank, I know exactly what you are going to say, and you know what I shall answer. In spite of the past, Magdalen is—'

The door was flung open, the footman stood in the doorway with the look of a Jack-in-the-box just emerged from its prison.

'Miss Cuthbert, my lady, she would like to speak to you in the hall.'

The coincidence made Frank feel dreadfully guilty, as if both the footman and Magdalen had personally overheard him, whilst Lady Mary, knowing that she at least was a true friend, hurried into the hall, where Miss Cuthbert stood in the twilight looking like some black-robed representation of night.

'My dear Magdalen, why do you stay here? Where have you come from? Why didn't you tell me? Is anything the matter? I did not hear you drive up. Why, in a fly, too?'

'Don't kiss me,' said Magdalen, in such a soft tone that Lady Mary hardly recognised it as hers. She put her gently away. 'You had better

not, though it is not infectious except from contact.'

'What nonsense, what is it? Has Mrs. Stewart had small-pox?'

'No, no; but will you take me in for one night, after you know that I have been with some one who has or has had diphtheria?'

'Oh, my dear!' said Lady Mary, in a suppressed state of excitement,—'yes, of course, you can stay here. It's all right, I'll give orders. I'm not afraid in the least; but, no, I won't ask you any more questions till after dinner. You are just in time.'

Such a warm welcome as this seemed to restore a little of Magdalen's powers of feeling. All through that long, long drive she had felt as if transformed into stone; besides, she was very weary, very sick at heart.

'If you are a good Samaritan you will let me go to bed and send me a mouthful of something up-stairs. I am very tired, and I think I have a headache, or what people call a headache.'

'Of course, anything you like, my dear Magdalen. Is Mrs. Stewart better?'

'Yes, but far from well; I must go back to-morrow early, but to-night—well, I wanted just the quiet you will give me.'

The two women went up-stairs together, and the household in general saw little of Miss Cuthbert either that evening or the next morning. Lady Mary was somewhat silent and absent during this time, and Frank, believing the Magdalen had come for another indefinite stay, suddenly departed to his studio. He was wrong in this small particular, however, but the mistake was of no account in comparison with his grand triumph. The moment of it came next day when his wife was again sitting in the twilight with him, for the artist enjoyed blindman's holiday time.

'Frank,' she began, but her lord and master was trying to draw a charcoal head, after the manner of the impressionists, and answered at cross-purposes.

'You don't need light,' he said, when he took up his block, 'for this sort of thing, and the less you look at your strokes the more they will look like the real thing.'

'Well, I like the impressionist school, don't abuse them, they make you think of something below the surface; but, Frank—'

'Really, Mary, to look at Helmont's portrait of Miss Dorant is an insult to art.'

'Do leave the impressionists, Frank, and listen to me; I suppose I must tell you some time or other.'

'Eh, what?'

'Well, about Magdalen. I was *nearly* right.'

Frank's interest was roused at once by the word *nearly*, and he laughed heartily.

'Oh, well, it's only nearly, is it? Let's hear the news, my dear Mary; so it wasn't *quite* so certain as you fancied?'

'Oh yes, it was. Frank, you needn't laugh. I've been puzzling my brains about it ever since dear Magdalen went away.'

'I think I can relieve your mind without your puzzling about it. Leslie wasn't such a fool as to make the offer.'

Lady Mary's face brightened.

'But he did—at least I believe he did—so there you are wrong.'

'Or, if he did, I was going to say, she didn't—'

'That you can't tell, indeed I believe she did, and that—'

'But the truth is—'

'That Brice Leslie did make the offer, and she refused him.'

'What! Since his illness, or before?'

'Oh, that doesn't matter—she has refused him, so I suppose you will always think you were right.'

'There was no thinking necessary. I was certain she would jilt him, as she did those other poor fellows. I'm sorry we put him in the way of seeing her.'

'Oh, I fancy it was love at first sight, but she isn't a jilt.'

'Come, Mary, do be sensible. Isn't it jilting a man when you act with him, and meander round with him, and walk and talk and make eyes at him, and then throw him over? Why, the Magdalen posed the whole time she was here, and thoroughly gulled that poor man.'

'Nonsense, Frank, I don't understand—there—I am honest, and I say I have lost; still, I'm sure Magdalen *did* like him and believed herself capable of making him happy, and, as he adored her, it was

very foolish of her to refuse,—still, till something, or some one, proves it to me in black and white, I shall not believe Magdalen hopelessly heartless.'

'Women will not understand the simplest logic. Didn't I tell you so at the time? Miss Cuthbert was merely amusing herself with him, she treated him as she has treated others. I wish you had not tried to bring it on, it's rather hard on a nice fellow like Leslie. However—'

'Don't, Frank,' said his wife impatiently. 'I'm horribly disappointed; indeed, I would rather my party had failed than this— Poor Magdalen!'

'That is certainly wasted pity, but, of course, least said soonest mended. Only, next time, don't ask the man and the woman here.'

Lady Mary shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'You remind me of the clergyman who in the marriage service says—"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" Have you noticed, Frank, there is no orthodox answer in the Prayer Book? I own I *meant* to do it, but—there, I need not have expected sympathy from *you*.'

'Polly, don't be cross, but—look here—I may be awfully old-fashioned, but there's too much of this

match-making in society; there are enough masculine fools without our trying to add to their number. But I'm wasting breath, your face says you are not convinced.'

Lady Mary rose and slowly paced the room. This pair, happy as they were, and because they were happy, did not often indulge in the expression of their deeper thoughts.

'Look here, Frank, I was wrong to—make a wager about it, but at the bottom of my heart it was really because I—I wanted some one, I wanted Magdalen, to be as happy as I am.'

Frank was conquered, and the quarrel ended here; but, strangely enough, both kept their own opinion—Frank that Magdalen Cuthbert was a shameless flirt, and had purposely beguiled Brice Leslie, and Lady Mary that some mystery was involved in her failure.

Brice Leslie was thrown back by the excitement he had gone through; a temporary paralysis of his limbs, a common result of diphtheria, succeeded in rendering him helpless as a baby, and much speculation of course followed as to the reason. Miss

Leslie put it down to one set of causes, the doctor to another, and the nurse to her having been told to leave him. The real reason, strangely enough, was never discovered.

But Brice's serious symptoms soon passed away. Perhaps the definite breaking off with Magdalen was, in reality, a relief to his mind, although he would not own it to himself. He could not help recognising the truth of Magdalen's words, at the same time that he was feeling as if life could never be the same to him again. The doctors—for a second one had to be called in—both agreed that, as soon as possible, the invalid should be moved on board ship and should take a sea-voyage. That would restore him better than anything else. His constitution was naturally strong, he would thus be able to overcome the after-effects of that treacherous malady.

Griselda Foy at this time wrote oftener than ever; she sent books to Brice, flowers and fruit, and her daily thoughtfulness began to tell, now that the Gordian knot was really cut. She had grown wonderfully older in this last month; even her home people recognised the fact, and this

caused her mother to be very tender with her. There was no doubt now that she loved Brice too much ever to think of any one else; all ideas of seeing Griselda a duchess or a fashionable lady were for ever given up by Mrs. Foy.

When she heard Brice was to be carried on board a P. and O., and take the voyage to the Cape and back, Griselda was very glad. Something in her heart told her this was best, and young as she was she had the power of forgetting herself in the thought for those she loved. It is a question, often worth sifting, whether such people get their reward. Griselda did, but it would not be safe for any one to embark on the path of unselfishness with any certain hope of it. They might find that virtue has most often to be content with itself and with nothing else for a prize.

But on the same day that Griselda heard the news that Brice would have to go abroad immediately, and that she might come and see him for a brief five minutes to say good-bye, she received a note in an unknown hand. The letter was signed A. Stewart, and was short, the characters being very shaky and not very legible.

'DEAR MISS FOY,—I am writing a very hasty line, to satisfy the mind of my dear patient. She cannot speak, but she is just able to write, and I copy her words: "Tell her that I have kept my promise; my love to both—MAGDALEN." I am sure you will all the more value the message when you know how great an effort it was for her to write at all. She is very ill, but we have two famous throat-doctors, and they have every hope of her recovery. I am kept out of the sick-room, as I can do nothing, and intense quiet is absolutely necessary in such a bad case of diphtheria.—Yours sincerely, A. STEWART.'

When Griselda went to say good-bye to Brice, she gave up some of her precious time in order that he might read the note. 'I know you would rather read this, dear Brice,' she said very quietly. He turned intensely pale as he took the letter.

'I have got over it—she must,' he said, not daring to look at Griselda.

'I hope she will—because—because I love her.'

'Telegraph to me, Griselda.'

'Yes; and oh, Brice, you will come back well and strong, and then, then—if—'

Neither of them said any more; in some lives tragic moments are wordless.

In her town-house Magdalen Cuthbert at that moment lay motionless in her sick-room. This woman, so much admired and sought after, was strangely lonely, or so it would have seemed to an outsider. The people who knew her best were all out of London. The few who did more than admire her were not allowed to come to her, the risk was too great; Mrs. Stewart herself, still very delicate, was really only in the way, and the doctors expelled her. There were two trained nurses, who took the nursing in turn. One of them had a gentle, sweet face, and Magdalen, when she cared to do anything, liked looking at her; but the disease had attacked her in its most virulent form—it cut her off almost at once from her fellow-creatures, for her throat was too bad to allow her to speak.

Both nurses said she was extraordinarily patient and calm; they even hinted that she ought to be

roused a little more, that she ought to fight with death, and when off duty they told stories of various cases of people who had lived, apparently because they would not die.

The doctors were wonderfully skilful, and they looked upon the case as one full of interest to science. They were heroic in their devotion and untiring in their efforts. They really conquered the disease, obstinate as it proved to be. One of them, indeed, the younger doctor, took a very deep interest in the patient, because he was struck with her forlorn condition. He said once, 'Such a handsome woman, and yet not one relation to come to her, only that fussy old woman who is useless.' Magdalen had several times smiled at him, even though she could not speak, and apparently her smile retained its old power.

They conquered the diphtheria, that was true, but the prostration was terrible; they had to fight next against that. The elder physician began to look grave. 'This is getting serious,' he remarked to his colleague.

'Serious, yes, but not too serious,' said the other man. 'She has a splendid constitution.'

'That seems to make but little difference in these diphtheritic cases.'

But the younger man was determined to save her; he disbelieved in rules about recovery.

Magdalen herself did not allow her thoughts to be divined. She bore everything with heroic courage, but as for the rest—

Her mind had remained perfectly clear through all the agony of her suffering, but at this moment that terrible ordeal was over, and she now and then fancied herself elsewhere. Now and then, too, she thought Percy had come back, and was standing close beside her; she could see his handsome face, his smile, and his dark eyes full of love. She stretched out her hand to touch him, and to ask him why he did not kiss her, but instead of finding him she touched the nurse, who sat there reading. She was studying her Bible, and the place was marked by a lace picture of the Crucifixion. Magdalen was suddenly recalled to reality by being conscious of the nurse's gentle face, for the young woman rose and bent over her, and asked her if she wanted anything.

'I thought you were Percy,' whispered Magdalen, as if the nurse must know whom she meant.

The lace picture fell on the bed, and Magdalen's blue eyes rested upon it.

'Pin it up,' she said, 'where I can see it.'

The nurse complied. In another moment, however, the blue eyes looked at the nurse, and Magdalen tried to shake her head.

'Shall I take it down?'

'Yes.'

'You do not like it?'

'I want a—a—little joy. Is there any—anywhere?'

It was getting dusk, and there was a gentle knock at the door. The nurse went softly to open it, and a telegram was handed in to her. She came back to the bedside. Mrs. Stewart had opened it, and had sent it up.

'Here is a message from a friend. Shall I read it?'

The blue eyes said 'yes.' They were not dimmed at all, and the nurse admired them immensely.

'Give her our love—GRISELDA.'

Suddenly there was a smile over the patient's face; it lit up all the features; it seemed to triumph over pain and over weariness; it seemed as if she had received the answer to her question, and that the answer had been a certainty—that there was joy somewhere, even for her.

But as suddenly the smile faded, the eyes closed, and the door opened to let the young doctor come in.

He gave one glance at the beautiful face, and seized a bottle close at hand. He put his arm round Magdalen, and lifted her gently—she was already unconscious—and tried to pour the liquid down her throat.

'Ah!' he thought, 'it sometimes happens like this in these cases—sudden syncope. Hayles was right after all.'

He and the nurse did their utmost, but it was useless.

Both of them were too much used to death to be outwardly moved, but in his heart the young man grieved. Aloud he said—

'A clot of blood touched the heart. It must have been instantaneous. No blame to you,

nurse; you did everything that was possible. Our skill is powerless in such cases.'

'She was too beautiful to die,' said the nurse, and there were unshed tears in her eyes.

'How old did you say?' asked the doctor, when he had to write the certificate of death—

'A woman of forty.'

But there were a few then and afterwards who sorrowed deeply, and who never forgot Magdalen Cuthbert.

THE END.

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OCTOBER 1893

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